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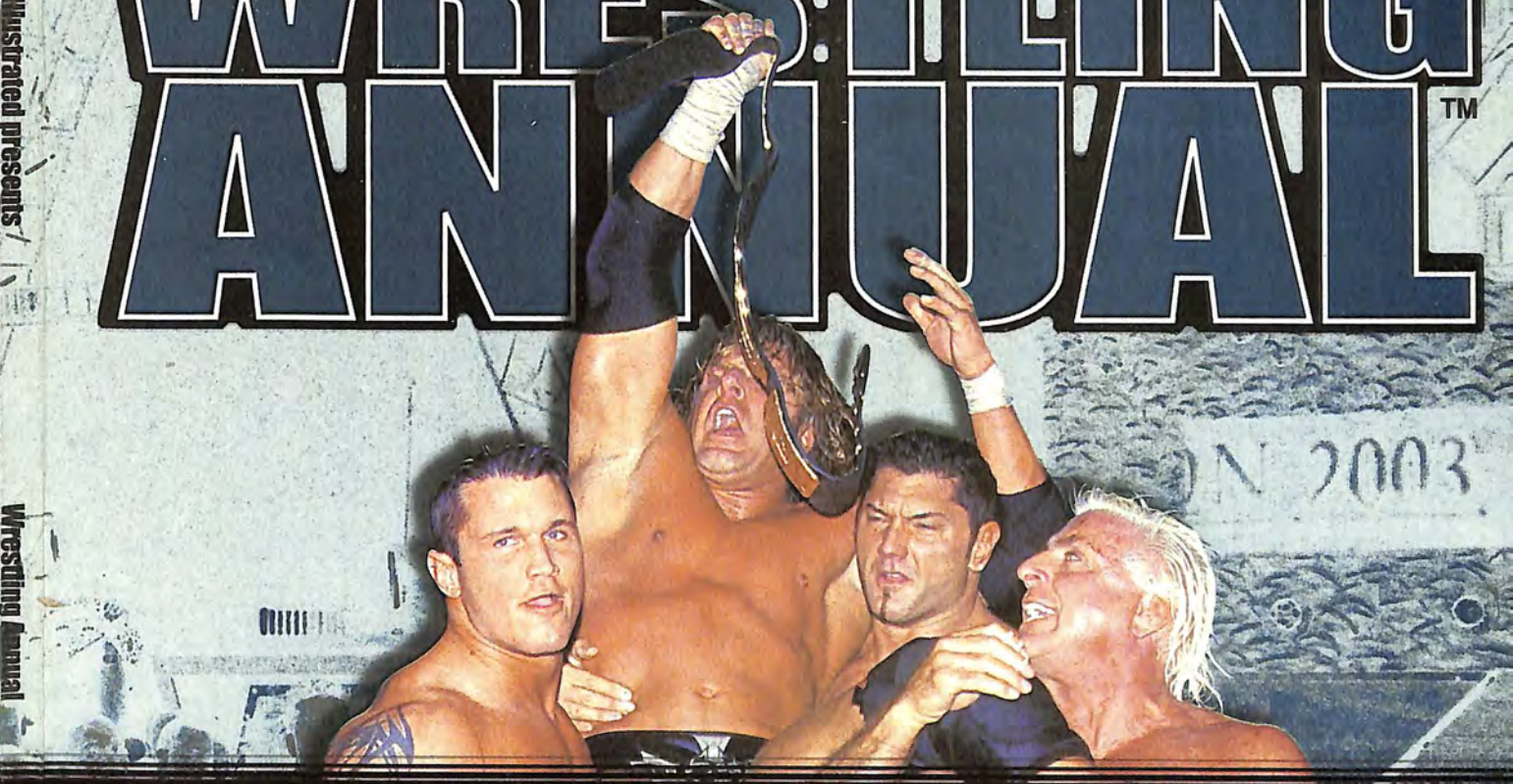

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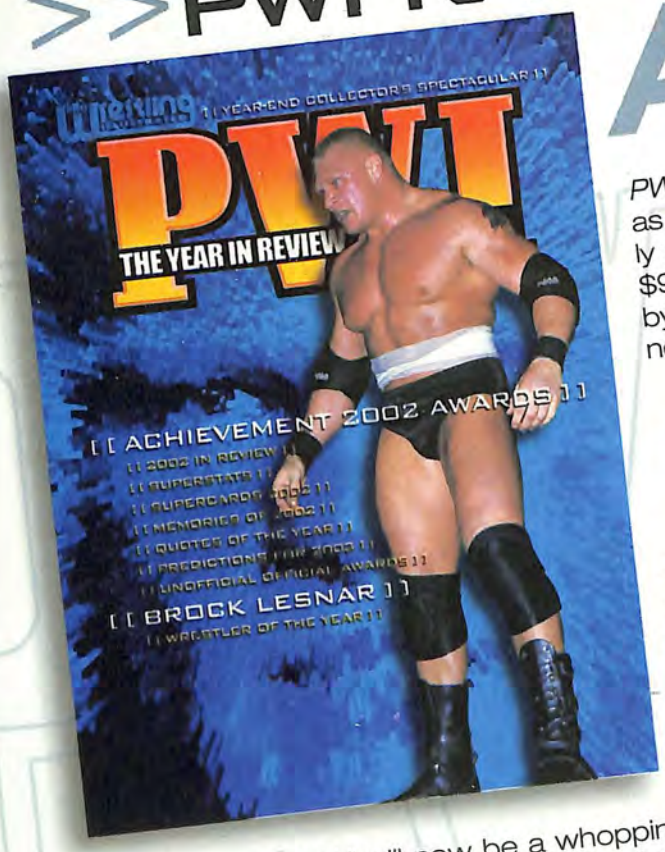
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Publisher's Note

HOW SHOULD WE remember the year 2003? A slow but steady stream of casualties from Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to U.S. terror alert levels fluctuating between "Elevated" and "High," reminded us that it will be a very long time before the world forgets about 9/11. But there were also reminders that 2003 wasn't nearly as difficult as 2001 or even 2002, as the legal plights of Michael Jackson, Kobe Bryant, and Scott Peterson became regular fare for the mainstream media.

And what about pro wrestling? WWE carried its brand extension further by launching its first brand-exclusive pay-per-views, including Raw's Insurrextion in Newcastle, England; Raw's Bad Blood in Houston, Texas; and Smackdown's Vengeance in Denver, Colorado. Fortunately, there wasn't a huge drop in buy rates for any of those pay-per-views, or the other brand-exclusive events that rounded out the year.

Steve Austin wrestled one last great match before his retirement, losing to The Rock at WrestleMania XIX. The Rock solidified his status as one of Hollywood's top new action stars with a leading role in *The Rundown,* prompting him to make only occasional appearances. Bill Goldberg's debut fell flat, but he did pick up some momentum as the months went by. Triple-H recovered from his injuries and his honeymoon and re-established his dominance by the end of 2003. Hulk Hogan left WWE for the second time in a year. Clearly, much of the responsibility for WWE's future success rested with Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar, John Cena, Randy Orton, Batista, and a new generation of stars.

Speaking of Hogan, the most famous headliner of the past 20 years negotiated with NWA-TNA, initially planning to appear in the company's first three-hour, Sunday night pay-per-view. Knee surgery sent Hogan into rehab and TNA into damage control before that event could take place. Nevertheless, A.J. Styles' impressive NWA heavyweight title reign, the increasingly innovative X division, and the patience and understanding of Panda Energy helped the Jarretts' grand experiment survive 2003. Ring of Honor, which experienced a breakout year, provided another alternative to WWE.

Sadly, 2003 was plagued by far too many deaths. The Sheik, Freddie Blassie, Stu Hart, Dick Hutton, and Moondog Spot died after many proud years in the ring, even if Spot did spend much of his career gnawing on a big bone. On the other hand, the deaths of Curt Hennig, Elizabeth, Pit Bull II, Road Warrior Hawk, and Crash Holly brought about the endless debate: Which is more to blame, the wrestling lifestyle or personal behavior?

We examine all of these news stories in our fourth edition of WRESTLING ANNUAL. This 180-page volume is the definitive wrestling yearbook of 2003. Senior Writer Harry Burkett documented all of the news again this year, while Contributing Artist Jason Conlan provided the hilarious caricatures. Too often overlooked is the superb design work of our art department, with Greg Stevens spearheading the effort for this issue. And let's not forget our stable of contributing photographers (listed at right), who provided us with the spectacular action and posed photos you'll see all over the pages of this magazine.

What does the year 2004 have in store? A U.S. presidential race is sure to provide some wacky headlines, and we're hopeful that pro wrestling will do the same. But don't become too settled into the New Year just yet. Take a moment—or perhaps an entire afternoon—to enjoy this trip back to 2003!

Stu Saks

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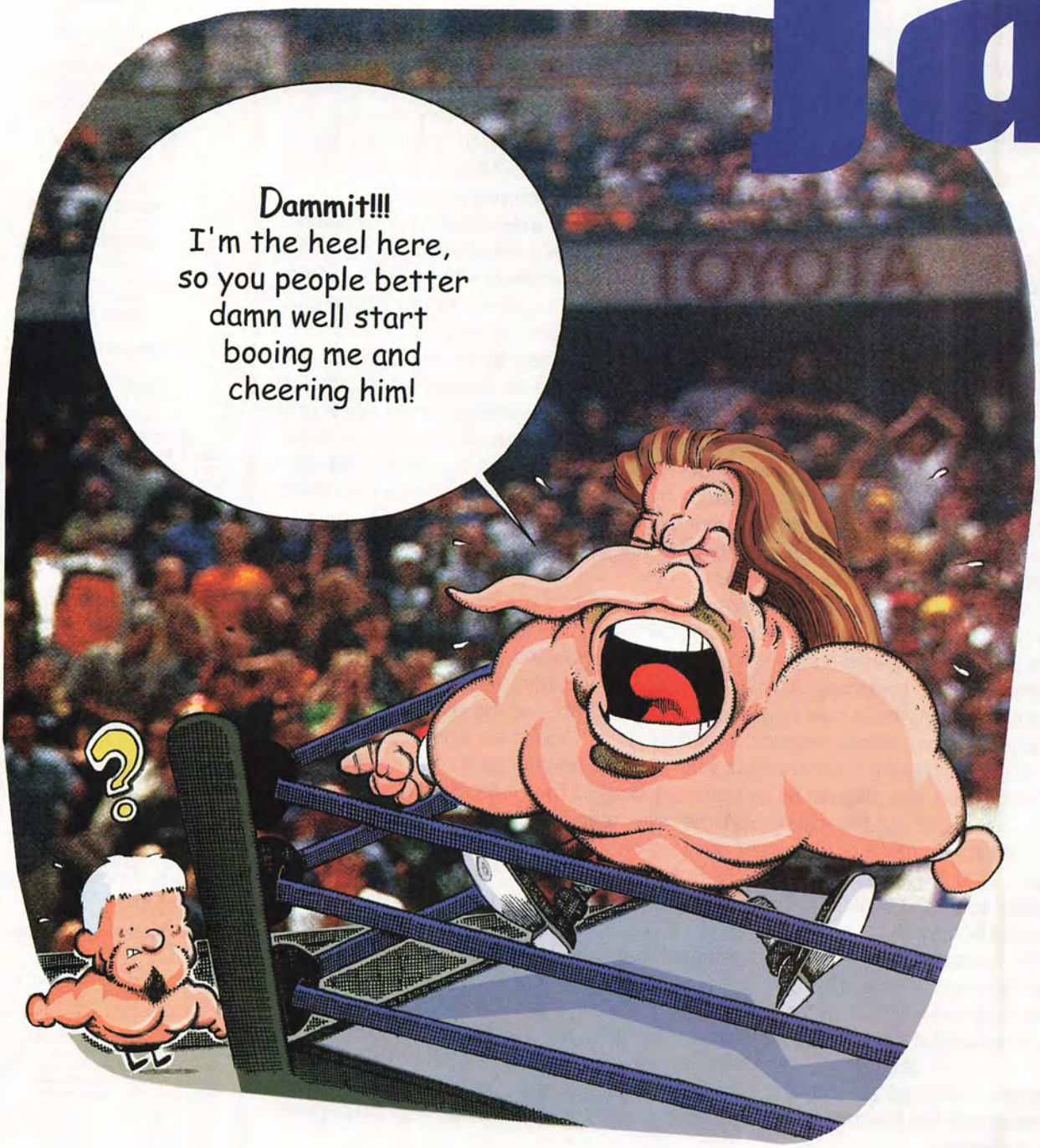
Dammit!!!
I'm the heel here, so you people better damn well start booing me and cheering him!
?

nuary

BY THE END of January, fans had a good idea of where the wrestling business was headed in 2003. Brock Lesnar, by winning the Royal Rumble, ensured that he would be a main-eventer at WrestleMania XIX and probably the remainder of the year. WWE Smackdown champion Kurt Angle also gained momentum following his win over Chris Benoit at the Rumble. An Angle-Lesnar clash was a future certainty. Likewise, Triple-H survived an ugly match with Scott Steiner, leaving little doubt that he would remain synonymous with Raw championship gold in 2003.

Meanwhile, Vince Russo's influence in NWA-TNA assured that promotion would remain a strange amalgam of Jim Crockett Promotions, WWE's "Attitude" era, and WCW's forgettable final years. Although the product wasn't necessarily consistent, the surprise appearances of Dusty Rhodes, The Road Warriors, Nikita Koloff, The Rock 'n' Roll Express, and Tony Schiavone made TNA pay-per-views unpredictable and usually entertaining.

It's always sad to report deaths so early in the new year, but we had that duty at the dawn of 2003. The death of The Sheik, who was hardcore long before anyone invented the word, reminded everyone how the old guard of the 1950s and 1960s were on the verge of dying out and how important it was to appreciate them while they were still here.

Interestingly enough, there were no obituaries for Al Wilson, who probably played a round of golf after his death on *Smackdown.*

BROCK LESNAR RUMBLES TOWARD SMACKDOWN TITLE SHOT

In one of the most interesting developments since WWE's brand extension in April 2002, the Royal Rumble became the first major event to feature both Raw and Smackdown superstars in the same ring at the same time, 15 from each brand to be exact. So promotional pride was on the line, as well as the traditional world title opportunity at WrestleMania. The winner of the Rumble would receive a shot at the heavyweight champion of his brand.

As it turned out, Brock Lesnar not only earned a title shot for himself, but also bragging rights for Smackdown. But it wasn't easy. Lesnar had to defeat The Big Show, to whom he lost the Smackdown title at Survivor Series 2002, earlier on the pay-per-view just to gain entry into the Rumble.

Go ahead and gloat, Brock!

"The New York State Athletic Commission banned The Sheik for life in 1969 when he started a riot."

The initial drama involved Raw superstar Shawn Michaels, who was the first entrant into the Rumble. Eight years earlier, Michaels had drawn the number-one spot and overcame incredible odds to win the Rumble, and fans were anxious to see whether he could do it again. Unfortunately, Christopher Nowinski distracted "The "Heartbreak Kid" from ringside, enabling the number-two entrant—Chris Jericho—to eliminate him.

After 50 minutes of action, the final four consisted of Raw superstars Kane and Batista and Smackdown superstars Lesnar and The Undertaker. "Big Evil" clotheslined Batista to the arena floor, and, surprisingly, dumped half-brother Kane over the top rope. Before Undertaker could focus on Lesnar, the Minneapolis native sent UT over the top rope to earn a shot at Smackdown champion Kurt Angle at WrestleMania XIX. The Undertaker shook Lesnar's hand in a show of respect.

LEGENDARY MADMAN THE SHEIK DIES

The Sheik, perhaps wrestling's most celebrated sadist, died on January 19 in a Michigan hospital, eight years after a heart attack ended his career and contributed to a steady physical decline. The Sheik, whose real name was Edward Farhat, had asked to be taken off a respirator after experiencing liver and kidney failure. He was 76.

Sheik vs. Brazil: classic feud

The legendary figure died in Lansing, the city in which he was born on June 7, 1926. The son of Lebanese immigrants, he went on to become a football star at the University of Michigan and served in World War II.

Despite that all-American background, he wrestled as the villainous Sheik of Araby when he gained fame in the Chicago area in 1950. He finally became a main-eventer in the mid-1960s, particularly in Detroit and Toronto. Despised for retaining his U.S. title through the use of fireballs, pencils, forks, and other foreign objects, The Sheik feuded with Bobo Brazil and Dick the Bruiser in Detroit's Cobo Hall, and even scored a tainted victory over Andre the Giant in a death match at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens.

The Sheik also defeated both Bobo Brazil and Freddie Blassie for the Americas title in California, and beat Seiji Sakaguchi for the JWA United National belt in Japan. He challenged WWWF World champion Bruno Sammartino three times in Madison Square Garden, but the New York State Athletic Commission banned him for life in 1969 when he started a riot. He wrestled Pedro Morales for the WWWF strap in Boston, and, in 1976, against Sammartino one more time in Toronto.

In later years, The Sheik trained his nephew Sabu and Rob Van Dam. He remained very popular in Japan, where he beat Damien in his final match in May 1994.

HULK HOGAN RETURNS AFTER FIVE-MONTH HIATUS

WWE fans didn't care for their last image of Hulk Hogan, that of Brock Lesnar beating him with an F5 and mercilessly bashing him with a steel chair. Hogan aggravated old back and knee injuries during that match in August, and didn't return because of his differences with Vince McMahon and WWE Creative. He even teased the idea of competing in Japan instead of making a WWE comeback.

During the January 23 broadcast of *Smackdown,* General Manager Stephanie McMahon told viewers to stay tuned for a major announcement later in the show. To everyone's surprise, she introduced Hulk Hogan in the final segment. The crowd cheered the "Hulkster" for nearly 10 minutes, and Hogan vowed to make the most of what could be his WWE farewell tour.

This prompted Vince McMahon to make his first *Smackdown* TV appearance in several months, too. Angry that Hogan was stealing the spotlight, Mc-

Back again, brother!

Mahon said "Hulkamania" and Al Wilson had something in common: They were both dead. McMahon said he didn't answer to anyone, not even Hogan's "man upstairs." Hogan punched McMahon, ripped off his T-shirt, and threw it on top of him. Obviously, the long-awaited feud between the WWE chairman and his most famous "creation"—nearly 20 years in the making—was underway.

Interestingly, Hogan's appearance marked the 19th anniversary of his first WWF title victory over The Iron Sheik.

STEINER BOOED DURING MATCH AGAINST RAW CHAMP TRIPLE-H

Scott Steiner hadn't competed at a major wrestling event for nearly two years. WWE had been hyping his return for more than two months. And the fans turned against him in less than 10 minutes.

While Steiner had received great reactions during promos on *Raw* and *Smackdown,* the live crowd attending the Royal Rumble pay-per-view at Boston's FleetCenter was obviously disappointed in the former WCW World champion's in-ring performance. His repeated use of overhead suplexes, including a few sloppy ones, alienated some fans during the early stages of his match against WWE Raw champion Triple-H.

Not even Ric Flair's constant interference on Triple-H's behalf helped Steiner's cause. Once "Big Poppa Pump" lost the live crowd, he failed to ever get them back. The ending of the match punctuated an all-around flop, with the champion grabbing his trusty sledgehammer and ramming it into Steiner's midsection. The referee immediately disqualified Triple-H, resulting in only the second DQ decision for a pay-per-view WWE world title match in four years.

"Freakzilla" tried to salvage the debacle by placing Triple-H in a Steiner recliner. When that didn't work, he dropped the Raw title belt across Helmsley's chest and raised his arms. More boos. Steiner then stood on the middle turnbuckle and posed for the increasingly hostile Bostonians.

Some criticized WWE officials for expecting Steiner, notorious for his poor stamina due to debilitating back and knee injuries, to endure an 18-minute match. It was a sad outing for a man who was once considered one of the greatest in-ring performers in the world.

VINCE RUSSO FORMS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT XTREME

Trying to replicate the New Blood faction he created in WCW, Vince Russo began putting together a clique in NWA-TNA, with A.J. Styles, David Flair, and Triple-X, a three-man team comprised of Christopher Daniels, Elix Skipper, and Low-Ki, being the cornerstone. Meanwhile, NWA heavyweight champion Jeff Jarrett gathered a group of old-schoolers, including former The Road Warriors and Dusty Rhodes, to battle Russo.

"The long-awaited feud between the WWE chairman and his most famous 'creation'—nearly 20 years in the making—was underway."

Steiner couldn't pump up Boston

"S-E-X ... get it?"

While only a handful of new-schoolers supported Jarrett, Russo openly encouraged established veterans to support the SEX faction. This became apparent when Raven, fresh from his WWE release, attacked Jarrett at Russo's urging. Also, the mysterious Mr. Wrestling IV attacked Dusty Rhodes during an eight-man tag team match pitting "The American Dream," the Warriors, and Jarrett against Russo and Triple-X. The man lifted his mask to reveal Nikita Koloff, who delighted in punishing his old "Superpowers" partner.

The Rock 'n' Roll Express pulled a similar stunt on January 29, when they pretended to be trying to save Chris Harris and James Storm from a gang-style attack. Instead, Robert Gibson and Rick Morton gave them several chair shots.

But Russo's masterstroke might have been inviting Tony Schiavone—sporting bleached hair, a dark beard, a Kiss T-shirt, and a Hawaiian shirt—to bash TNA announcer and former WCW broadcast partner Mike Tenay. He said Tenay had caused many of his own personal problems, and that Russo was not responsible for WCW's demise.

Obviously, Russo liked the idea of having "T-Bone" spew his propaganda, even if it was for one night only.

JIM ROSS POSTS FINAL "ROSS REPORT"

In the January 3 edition of wwe.com's "Ross Report," good ol' J.R. offered the ultimate inside scoop: His online column would be going permanently offline. Ross cited his busy schedule, in addition to the frustrations involved with writing a column that is truly from the inside.

"I have never intended to slight any talent, but the mere omission of a particular talent from the 'Ross Report' can be perceived as a negative for that individual," Ross noted in his final commentary. "That was never my goal, but it seemed like the column oftentimes took on a life of its own, with many often writing about what J.R. 'really' was saying."

As if to validate Ross' assertion, rumors began to persist that Vince McMahon might have asked him to discontinue his column because J.R. was often too candid in his opinions regarding WWE, especially with the company struggling through a creative and financial downturn.

The discontinuation of the "Ross Report" was considered unfortunate among the wrestling media because it was far more than a WWE press release. Ross was a trustworthy source for injury updates, honest evaluations of the WWE product, and the latest news concerning up-and-coming OVW talent.

Nevertheless, Ross was mindful of his upcoming publicity tour for his new cookbook and barbecue sauce. He had also expressed a desire to finally spend more time with his family. Within six months, Ross had scaled back his duties as vice president of talent relations, and handed off many responsibilities to Johnny Ace and Fit Finlay.

"Ross was a trustworthy source for injury updates, honest evaluations of the WWE product, and the latest news concerning up-and-coming OVW talent."

RAW'S 10TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL AIRS LIVE ON TNN

The much-anticipated *Raw* 10th anniversary special aired to mixed reviews, ranging from satisfactory to very disappointing. While it had been believed that *Raw* would celebrate its first decade during its regular Monday time slot, and would potentially feature the return of Steve Austin, WWE produced a show for TNN that resembled the Slammy Awards of yesteryear.

Airing from New York City, the 10th anniversary program had the feel of a low-budget awards ceremony at the local sports bar, rather than a celebration of the highest-rated show in the history of cable-television. Still, diehard *Raw* fans had to appreciate the nostalgia of looking back at the program's greatest moments and tributes to long-gone superstars.

The fact that Trish Stratus was named Diva of the Decade—despite the contributions of true pioneers such as Sunny (Tammy Sytch), Chyna (Joanie Laurer), and Sable (Rena Mero)—made it seem as if WWE was giving current superstars

Goldust gives Steven Richards a curtain call
***Raw*, January 27, 2003**
Photo by Gary Dineen/Winning Image

Diva of the Decade in action

an extra boost at the expense of former employees.

The lowest point was The Rock's appearance, supposedly live via satellite. Although the New York fans heckled The Rock mercilessly, "The Great One" seemed oblivious to the negative reaction, tipping off that he was live on tape rather than in real time. And there were the no-shows, which might have been beyond WWE's control: no Steve Austin, no Mick Foley, no Undertaker, and no Bret Hart.

"The Rock seemed oblivious to the negative reaction, tipping off that he was live on tape rather than in real time."

SKIPPER AND LOW-KI BEAT HARRIS AND STORM FOR NWA TAG BELTS

Vince Russo's SEX faction took another step toward dominating TNA when Elix Skipper and Low-Ki beat America's Most Wanted for the NWA tag team title on January 22 at Nashville's Fairgrounds Coliseum. As it turned out, Russo's influence on Elix Skipper and Low-Ki was undeniable, as the two Triple-X members resorted to cheating tactics to take the belts from Chris Harris and James Storm.

Skipper and Low-Ki dominated the match by the eight-minute mark, and double-teamed Storm close to their corner. Storm broke free and tagged Harris, but the referee didn't see it. Both members of Triple-X continued their onslaught until Storm finally broke free again and tagged a charged up Harris.

The champions went after Harris, and the match erupted into a four-way melee. Harris caught Low-Ki with a sitdown power bomb, but the referee was too distracted by Storm and Skipper to see the pinning predicament. Just as America's Most Wanted seemed ready to put away their challengers, Christopher Daniels—the third member of Triple-X—prevented them from executing their death sentence finisher. That enabled Low-Ki to hit Storm with a scintillating kick. Harris defended his partner and caught Low-Ki with a bodyslam.

At the 15-minute mark, Skipper smashed Harris with a title belt, and draped Low-Ki's arm over Storm for the pinfall and the NWA tag team championship. And TNA official Bob Armstrong had another reason to hate SEX.

NAOTO MORISHITA'S DEATH ADDS TO PRIDE'S WOES

Only hours after expressing optimism for Pride's future during a press conference, Naoto Morishita committed suicide in his hotel room. According to reports, he used a belt to hang himself. As Pride president, Morishita had emerged as one of Japan's best promoters of wrestling, the martial arts, and shootfighting in recent years.

But Pride had suffered its share of difficulties in the weeks leading to Morishita's death. Kazuyoshi Ishii, president of a mixed martial arts promotion known as K-1, had been arrested and charged with tax evasion on December 26. Two more officials resigned, leaving K-1 in a state of disarray.

Morishita had been counting on collaborative ventures with K-1 to jump-start Pride, and inevitably lost money as a result of the company's downfall. It was un-

certain whether these business pressures contributed to Morishita's suicide. Following Morishita's death, Pride officials scrambled to find a new president and divert attention from the tremendous amount of negative media attention.

"The Japanese scene is very unstable right now," noted *PWI* correspondent Koichi Yoshizawa. "New Japan, Pro Wrestling NOAH, and Zero-One are only moderately successful at this time, and there are constant rumors that All-Japan may go out of business after 30 years of existence. That is bad news in a tradition-based society like Japan. The success of Bob Sapp led many to believe that a blend of mixed martial arts and wrestling was the wave of the future, but the scandals surrounding companies like Pride and K-1 are very detrimental to the health of *puroresu* in this country."

HARDCORE HOLLY DEFENDS HIS ACTIONS ON *TOUGH ENOUGH III*

During one memorable episode of *Tough Enough III,* Bob "Hardcore" Holly infuriated viewers and some of his peers by attacking Matt Cappotelli during a tag team match pitting five trainers against the five remaining *TE3* contestants. Cappotelli's injuries, although minor, included bruises to his neck and face, as well as a black eye. Holly later appeared on wwe.com's *Byte This* to discuss the matter with hosts Kevin Kelly and Tom Prichard, along with Cappotelli, Al Snow, and producer John "Big" Gaburick.

"Matt, you're weak-minded," Holly told Cappotelli. "You'll never make it in the locker room if you make a fuss over a black eye like you did." Holly said he used stiff tactics against Cappotelli to make him tougher, and to prepare him for the rougher aspects of the business. The former Intercontinental champ stated he didn't intend to hurt Cappotelli heading into the tag team match, but insisted the experience was good for the youngster.

Cappotelli disagreed. "From Day One we walked into training, it's been beat into us that you need to trust the person across the ring from you. And for someone to come in and kind of contradict what we have been taught, it's real confusing for a young person like me."

Al Snow, noting his fondness for Holly, supported his student nonetheless. Commented Snow, "I think that it taught Matt a lesson in the long run, but I don't think, Bob, you were hitting in places that were necessarily safe, like the back of his neck and kicking him in the face."

Holly concluded by saying that he respected Cappotelli for winning the *Tough Enough* competition, and sticking with his dream of becoming a wrestler.

IN OTHER NEWS

The Dudley Boyz defeated William Regal and Lance Storm for the WWE Raw tag team title at the Royal Rumble, but lost the belts back the next night on *Raw* ... WWE rookie Nathan Jones injured Matt Hardy's leg during a house show in Milwaukee ... Kane, Rey Misterio Jr., Jacquelyn, and Trish Stratus disclosed their favorite foods, singers, and cars, along with other passions, in *Vibe* ... Danny Doring ended The Bruiser's one-year Maryland Championship Wrestling title reign ... Joey Matthews captured the MCW Rage TV title, and seemed headed for a feud with former partner Christian York ... "Redneck" Billy Redwood returned after a severe neck injury had kept him out of action for a year ... Border City Wrestling Can-Am champion Johnny Swinger used wrist tape, a low blow, and other roughhouse tactics to beat Gangrel in Toronto ... A.J. Styles beat Larry Zbyszko at a TNA pay-per-view ... Jason Cross suffered a broken hand and crushed knuckle during a match against David Young ... Damaja attacked The Rock's father, Rocky Johnson, on Ohio Valley television, and stated that men such as The Rock, Ric Flair, and Steve Austin had to commit atrocities to become superstars ... Pez Whatley suffered a heart attack and waited for a heart transplant at Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville.

Was Holly a tad too hardcore?

"'From Day One we walked into training, it's been beat into us that you need to trust the person across the ring from you. And for someone to come in and kind of contradict what we have been taught, it's real confusing for a young person like me.'"

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH

WWE ACCUSES OWEN HART'S WIDOW OF UNFAIR PRACTICES

Attorneys for WWE alleged that Martha Hart, the widow of Owen Hart, unfairly targeted the company in her wrongful death lawsuit while absolving Lewmar Inc. of any responsibility in her husband's fatal fall at Over the Edge 1999. Lewmar Inc. is the manufacturer of the trigger-latch shackle that somehow released in the stunt that killed Owen. It's worth noting that Lewmar had a $50-million liability insurance policy that Martha—along with Owen's parents, Stu and Helen—declined to target.

Hart: still the subject of legal battles

WWE also asserted that Martha's legal team, Robb & Robb of Kansas City, required Owen's 10 siblings to sign an agreement preventing them from testifying on WWE's behalf, testimony that would have been important in determining how many more years he had planned to remain an active wrestler. Such information would have affected the settlement amount.

Martha's attorney, Gary Robb, told the *Kansas City Star* that WWE hadn't been gouged in the $18-million settlement. "Bear in mind that the decision to settle solely belongs to the client, and we support that decision ..." he said. "Mrs. Hart felt that Lewmar wasn't at fault even one percent."

Missouri Circuit Court Judge Douglas E. Long Jr. agreed with WWE attorneys in a strongly worded ruling, stating there was "overwhelming evidence" that the Hart family "and/or its counsel engaged in fraud, collusion, and/or tortious conduct."

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: BROCK LESNAR

Winning the Royal Rumble would have been a good enough reason to proclaim Brock Lesnar Wrestler of the Month in January, but his accomplishment was all the more impressive when it was placed in perspective. Less than a year after his WWE debut, Lesnar had won the King of the Ring Tournament, defeated both Hulk Hogan and The Rock cleanly, held the Smackdown title for three months, and emerged as arguably the most popular superstar in the company.

Traditionally, the King of the Ring was designed to change fan perception of a wrestler, from the mid-card to potentially top tier status. The Royal Rumble typically makes the transformation complete, propelling a hot wrestler to a main event slot at WrestleMania.

After the 2003 Royal Rumble, there was no doubt that WWE officials, including Vince McMahon, felt Lesnar represented the future of the company. Not only did the former NCAA heavyweight champ beat The Big Show to gain entry into the Rumble, but he also emerged triumphant over 29 superstars of both brands—including The Undertaker, Kane, and Batista in the final four—to earn a shot at Smackdown champion Kurt Angle at WrestleMania XIX.

Lesnar kept on Rumbling

Undoubtedly, Lesnar hoped to join Triple-H, Steve Austin, Shawn Michaels, Bret Hart, Yokozuna, and Hulk Hogan, all of whom used Royal Rumble victories to catapult them to world title victories at WrestleMania.

Garrison Cade headlocks Rene Dupree
OVW, January 25, 2003
Photo by Scott Romer

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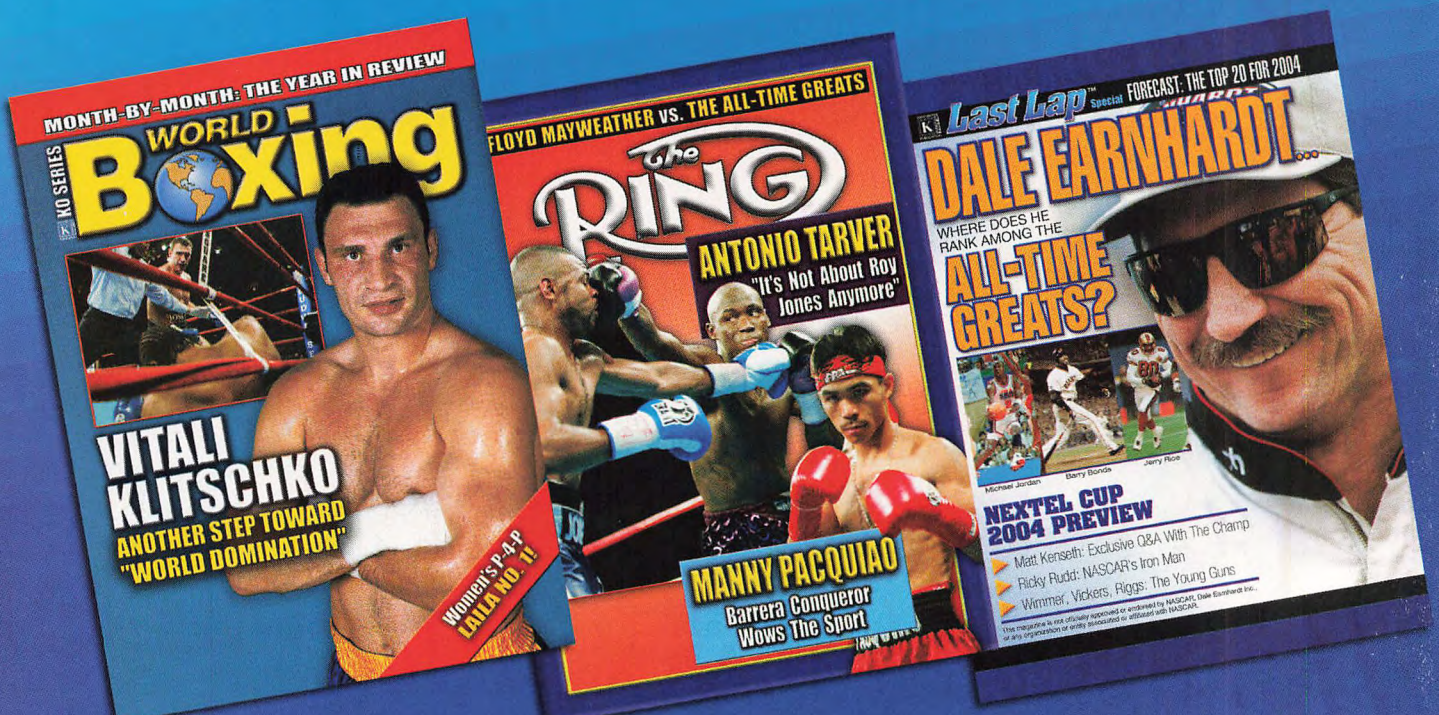

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Angle vs. Benoit: Match of the Year?

MATCH OF THE MONTH: KURT ANGLE VS. CHRIS BENOIT

For Chris Benoit fans, his clash with WWE Smackdown champion Kurt Angle at the Royal Rumble was the best of matches and the worst of matches. Benoit had never been better, yet it was never clearer that "The Rabid Wolverine" had hit a ceiling in WWE.

Benoit started the match with the kind of energy and aggressiveness that have endeared him to so many diehards, charging Angle at the opening bell. The junior members of Team Angle, Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas, immediately attacked Benoit, but the referee ordered them away from ringside.

Six minutes into the match, Benoit trapped Angle in a sharpshooter, but the champion escaped. Benoit followed up with a victory roll and, again, Angle escaped. Yet Benoit wasn't through. His overhead suplex sent Angle several feet into the air, and he scored big with a flying headbutt from the top rope. The only thing more incredible than Benoit's offense was Angle's ability to elude defeat.

Benoit went for his finishing hold, the crossface, at the 19-minute mark. But Angle rolled through the attempt and wrenched Benoit's leg into an anklelock. As "The Wolverine" kicked and thrashed to escape, Angle sealed Benoit's fate by gaining a better grip and turning the anklelock into a heel hook. Benoit tapped out. After Angle left the ring, the crowd drove Benoit to tears with a tremendous standing ovation.

WWE also seemed determined to seal Benoit's fate, willing to use him to ensure a great match on pay-per-view, but not to elevate him into an established main-eventer. Benoit seemed destined to be a Match of the Month wrestler ... but not much more.

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH: WWE KILLS OFF AL WILSON

Viewers hoped Dawn Marie would emerge from a deep sleep, walk to the bathroom, slide back the shower door, and see her smiling husband, Al Wilson, and learn that his death, like the death of Patrick Duffy's character on the TV show *Dallas* many years earlier, was all a dream. But that was not to be. Al Wilson, the easy-going father of Torrie Wilson, would not be returning to *Smackdown*. Al Wilson was dead.

Al Wilson and Dawn Marie (when Al was alive)

According to the storyline, Wilson, a senior citizen, was not able to keep pace with the saucy and sexy Dawn Marie on their wedding night, following their bizarre nuptials on *Smackdown*. Apparently, Mr. Wilson died of a heart attack. How do we know? WWE cameras were there to document most of it!

It was an unprecedented moment in wrestling history. This crazy sport has seen mummies competing in the ring, hillbillies from Mudlick, and a giant pushed off the top of an arena. But never has the business pushed itself so far from reality, and into the realm of sheer entertainment, as it did when WWE Creative killed off Al Wilson. It was as if the WWE powers-that-be were trying to prove what they've been asserting all along: that wrestling is entertainment, and wrestlers are mere characters.

Yet Al Wilson was a living, breathing human being and Torrie's actual father. By killing him off, WWE proved that it wasn't concerned about making its product believable. How would Creative explain Al's presence at Torrie's real life wedding later in the year?

But at least it gave Torrie a good reason to tear into Dawn Marie. And how does a grieving daughter gain revenge against her wicked stepmother for her father's death? Of course, she settles it in a three-minute match against Dawn Marie at the Royal Rumble.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"You spend 300 days a year on the road, getting thrown around a ring in front of 15,000 fans a night and going from town to town and hotel to hotel. Then one day you're out buying Huggies and remodeling the dining room and falling asleep watching *Everybody Loves Raymond* in your nice, comfortable recliner. It's a change in lifestyle, but it's also a welcome change, a refreshing change in a lot of ways."

—Shawn Michaels, commenting on his four-year retirement, "Hotseat," *Inside Wrestling,* June 2003

"When Russo went back out and did that promo, stuff like that … that's the type of stuff that I would discuss with you because it definitely involved your career, it definitely involved … My God, I want to make sure that your father, who is lying on his deathbed and watching TV, might not be sent over the edge by what I say. I want to take into account that your kids might be sitting in the crowd. You really need to think things through like that because it affects people on so many levels."

—Hulk Hogan, criticizing Vince Russo for the famous on-air diatribe he made against him at WCW's Bash at the Beach 2000, *Pro Wrestling Torch*

"Excluding that farcical *Tough Enough,* Christopher Nowinski has never tasted failure in his life. Maven made me see the world through his eyes—through the eyes of a loser, a failure. I'm never going to look at the world through those eyes again."

—Christopher Nowinski, explaining what motivates him to succeed in WWE, "Press Conference," *PWI,* May 2003

"I'm thinking about getting a house [in Birmingham, Alabama], I'm there so much."

—Triple-H, regarding yet another injury that prompted a visit to Dr. James Andrews, wwe.com

"Hey, man, don't stress. I'm not down with physical chess."

—John Cena, reassuring Michael Cole that he didn't want any violence, *Smackdown*

"We're all out there to entertain the people. Some people have a knack for it and some people need to be kicked up a little bit for it. I feel that's what they look for me to do, to kind of help them catch their niche and not try to copy something. Try to help them develop their own character."

—Billy Gunn, discussing his role in the WWE locker room while he was injured, wwe.com

"Eddie doesn't have his cousin … his buddy … his nephew Chavo to help him."

—Michael Cole, getting it right the third time, *Smackdown*

"If you'd been a little smarter, we might be having a *Nitro* reunion!"

—Gene Okerlund, firing back after Eric Bischoff called him an "idiot," *Raw*

"I see it as being 'toothless aggression.'"

—Chris Benoit, ensuring more T-shirt royalties for the future, *Smackdown*

"We saw men, women, and children going to the bathroom in the streets. You see someone walking on the sidewalk. They would stop, hike up their skirt or drop their pants, and crap right in the street with people watching. It was the filthiest, most disgusting place I've ever been."

—Lance Storm, describing the local attractions he saw during Raw's tour of India, stormwrestling.com

"Pay. Money. I'm not in this thing for the ego or glory. I enjoy what I do, but I do it for the money."

—Steve Williams, clarifying why he's in the wrestling business, wrestlingobserver.com

WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Brock Lesnar: Looked toward 'Mania for next big win
Hulk Hogan: "Immortal" in the hearts of the fans
Jim Ross: Chose family over business
Tony Schiavone: Still on Russo's speed dial
A.J. Styles: Beat a spud-head, *er,* living legend

LOSERS

Scott Steiner: "Big Poppa" needed an oxygen pump
Nikita Koloff: Stopped crying for Magnum T.A.
Hardcore Holly: Must have been a playground bully
Damaja: Needed to be ready for Rock Sr.'s "Ali shuffle"
Al Wilson: Couldn't collect on his life insurance

Y2J locks the Walls of Jericho on Scott Steiner
***Raw*, January 27, 2003**
Photo by Gary Dineen/Winning Image

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May 1981: Hussein Arab vs. Ivan Koloff: A Bloody War Explodes In A Neutral Country. Also: Bob Backlund, Bobo Brazil, Santana & Bravo, D. Von Erich-Race.

Sept. 1981: Patera & The Freebirds: The Unholy Alliance Seeks To Cripple Ted DiBiase. Also: Junkyard Dog, Dory Funk Jr., Killer Khan, Ivan Koloff.

March 1982: Backlund-Valentine Death Match: The WWF Title Is Back Where It Belongs. Also: Austin Idol, Spoiler, Tommy Rich, Brisco-DiBiase.

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May 1982: Adrian Adonis: "I Can Beat Bob Backlund ... I Just Can't Beat The System!" Also: Dusty Rhodes, Flair & Mr. Wrestling II, D. Von Erich-M. Graham, Hogan-Blackwell.

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Oct. 1982: Roddy Piper: "I Don't Have To Cheat To Defeat Tommy Rich." Also: James J. Dillon, Andre-Mulligan Sr., Pat Patterson, Magnificent Muraco.

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Dec. 1982: Andre vs. Mulligan: The Giant Is Mightier Than The Claw. Also: Grand Wizard, Jerry Lawler, Rich-Heenan, Jack Brisco.

Feb. 1983: Rhodes vs. Funk: The Bloody Horror Of A Barbed Wire Fence Match. Also: Ted DiBiase, Andre-Orton Jr., Hogan & Patera, Flair-Hansen.

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Nov. 1983: We Sent Hulk Hogan To Cover Bockwinkel vs. Wahoo ... And All Hell Broke Loose! Also: James J. Dillon, Race-Kevin Von Erich, Paul Ellering, Reed-JYD.

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Aug. 1984: Junkyard Dog Joins Jim Valiant's Boogie Woogie Brigade. Also: Steve O-Zbyszko, Magnum-Wrestling II, Austin Idol, Sugar-Spoiler.

Sept. 1984: Rick Martel Dethrones Jumbo Tsuruta: Finally, An AWA Champion To Be Proud Of. Also: Brody-LeDuc, Iron Sheik, Kerry Von Erich, Rock 'n' Roll Express.

Oct. 1984: Collision Of The Florida Musclemen: Can Billy Jack Squeeze Superstar Graham Out Of Wrestling? Also: Road Warriors, Flair-Steamboat, Eddie Gilbert, Ormdorff & Shultz-Atlas & Johnson.

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May 1991: Savage vs. Warrior: The Bloodlust Of Ex-Champions. Also: Steiners, Sting, Virgil, D. Sammartino-I. Koloff.

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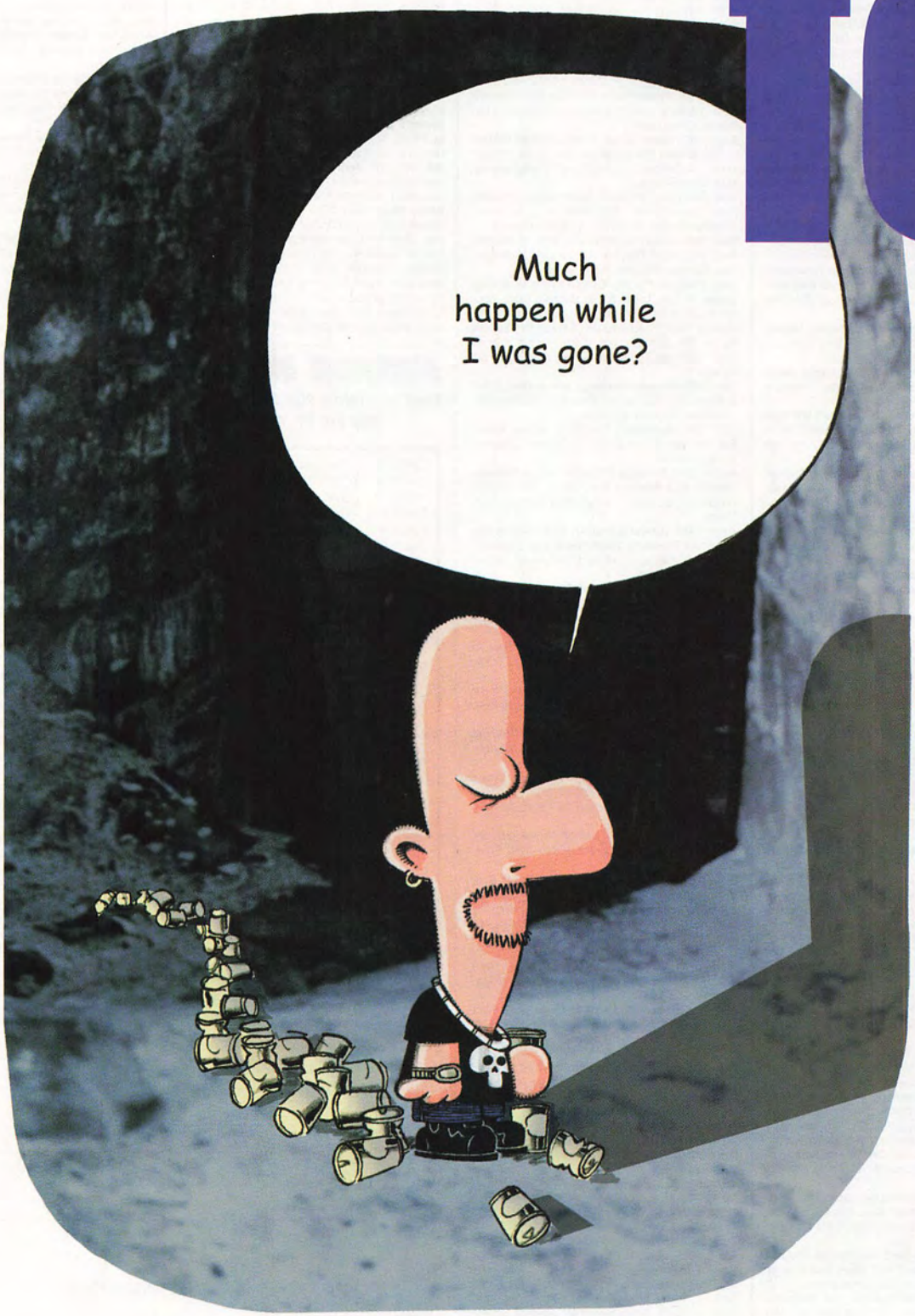
Much
happen while
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bruary

STEVE AUSTIN RETURNING to WWE was one of the few positive stories to break in February, as "Stone-Cold" made his first pay-per-view appearance in eight months at No Way Out. But that was a throwaway match pitting Austin against Raw General Manager Eric Bischoff and, as the wrestling world would later find out, his in-ring comeback would be very short-lived. Moreover, the long-awaited rematch between The Rock and Hulk Hogan failed to live up to their WrestleMania X8 classic, and the long-dreaded rematch between Raw champion Triple-H and Scott Steiner didn't stand a chance.

Even the best encounter at No Way Out, the handicap tag team match featuring Brock Lesnar and Chris Benoit vs. Team Angle, resulted in Smackdown champion Kurt Angle suffering an injury that would make retirement a distinct possibility. Also at the pay-per-view, the Smackdown roster was informed that head writer Paul Heyman, who had helped lead the brand to ratings success, was being demoted to the role of consultant.

Over in TNA, Vince Russo played more mind games with NWA champion Jeff Jarrett, claiming to be his friend while doing everything possible to destroy him. Russo's expectation that Glenn Gilberti (Disco Inferno) would finish off Jarrett indicated that Vinny Ru probably wouldn't get the job done.

Of course, the worst news of all was the death of Curt Hennig, who died in a Florida hotel room at the age of 44. The so-called wrestling lifestyle had claimed another victim, and the entire industry mourned its loss.

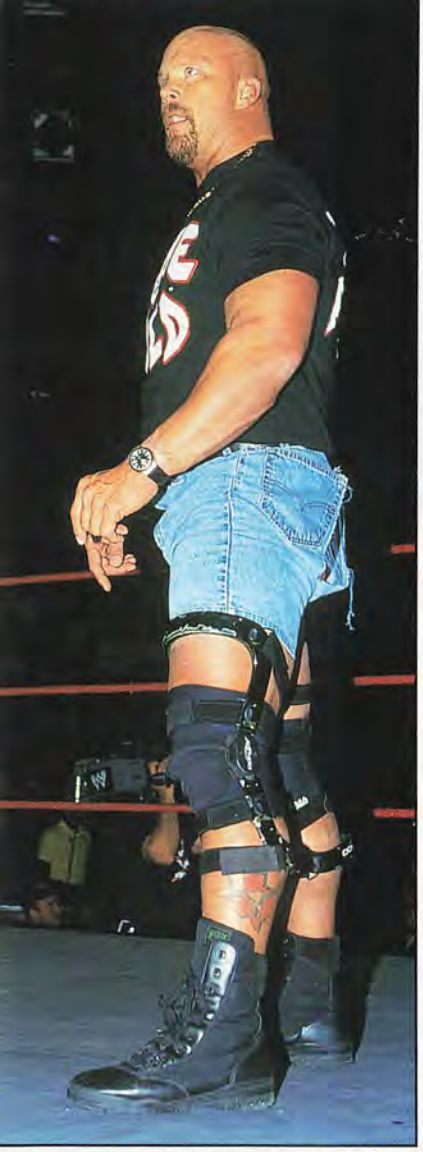
CURT HENNIG DIES OF DRUG-RELATED CAUSES

The death of Curt Hennig shocked the wrestling world on February 10, and made headlines on CNN, MSNBC, and other media outlets. He had been scheduled to wrestle in the main event of a show promoted by Jimmy Hart in Brandon, Florida, but friends found him dead in a hotel room earlier in the day. The Tampa Medical Examiner's Office later confirmed that acute cocaine intoxication was the cause of his death. He was 44.

Curtis Michael Hennig was born in Minneapolis on March 28, 1958, the son of veteran AWA star Larry "The Ax" Hennig. He was an amateur wrestler at Robbinsdale High School, where he was a close friend of Rick Rude. He defeated Billy Howard in his 1980 pro debut, and beat Johnny Rodz in his first appearance in Madison Square Garden one year later.

Hennig spent his early career as a preliminary wrestler in the WWF and then became a heavyweight and tag team champion in the Pacific Northwest. From 1986 until his death, Hennig captured one major championship after another, including the AWA World tag team, AWA World heavyweight, WWF Intercon-

Hennig vs. Billy Kidman (1999)



Back? Oh hell yeah!

tinental, WCW U.S., and WCW World tag team titles. Hennig was also a very entertaining performer, both as "Mr. Perfect" in the WWF and as leader of The West Texas Rednecks in WCW.

He was impressive enough during a special appearance in the 2002 Royal Rumble that the WWF offered him a full-time contract. But some roughhousing with Brock Lesnar during a transatlantic flight prompted his release from WWE a few months later. He went on to compete semi-regularly for a while in NWA-TNA, and his final title victory was over Bruno Sassi for the Future of Wrestling championship in December 2002.

STEVE AUSTIN RETURNS TO WWE

Vince McMahon, Jim Ross, and several top superstars publicly condemned Steve Austin for unprofessional conduct when he walked out of WWE prior to a live edition of *Raw* in June 2002. But sagging ratings and pay-per-view buy rates made even the harshest critics look forward to the day that "Stone-Cold" would return.

Austin finally ended his eight-month exile at No Way Out. McMahon chose Eric Bischoff as his opponent, mainly to punish "Easy E" for his lackluster performance as Raw general manager. It was Bischoff who had banished Austin from WCW back in xxxx. The Montreal fans cheered Austin, who looked surprisingly buff at a mean 265 pounds, as he stomped Bischoff and finished him off with two stunners in only four minutes of action. Austin gave Bischoff two more stunners for good measure.

"I'm getting a fine reception," Austin said of his locker room homecoming during an interview posted on wwe.com. "There were a couple of people who either I pulled aside or they pulled me aside, and we kind of buried the hatchet with stuff that went on. Like I said, I did what I did, and so be it."

The former WWF World champion noted that personal issues, nagging injuries, and dissatisfaction with the creative process led to his walkout. Austin said he worked toward a possible WWE return during his entire hiatus by training a different body part every day, punching a heavybag, and committing to 90-minute cardiovascular workouts. A low-fat diet and reduced alcohol intake also contributed to his improved physique.

"We've always been able to make stars, but it takes a while," Vince McMahon had told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in December. "You can't just snap your fingers and replace an Austin and Rock." Indeed.

PAUL HEYMAN RELIEVED OF WRITING DUTIES

Following a series of clashes with WWE Executive Producer Kevin Dunn and even a reported physical altercation with *Raw* writer Brian Gewirtz, former ECW owner Paul Heyman was dismissed as head of the Smackdown brand's creative team. While Heyman had successfully led *Smackdown* to ratings superiority over *Raw,* and helped keep it the top-rated show on UPN, his combative behavior was said

Heyman stayed on as manager of Team Angle

"We've always been able to make stars, but it takes a while. You can't just snap your fingers and replace an Austin and Rock."

to be the main reason for Vince McMahon's decision.

Heyman was retained as a consultant to both brands and continued to have an on-air managerial role on Smackdown shows. McMahon appointed Bruce Prichard, a long-time WWE executive best known for his Brother Love character, and Dave Lagana, once a protege of Heyman, as the new hands-on writers for *Smackdown.* Wrestlers were notified of the change at No Way Out.

While *Smackdown* didn't have the hardcore edge of ECW, its emphasis on athleticism and in-ring action were reminiscent of Heyman's old promotion. Also, *Smackdown* had fewer backstage skits and more realistic storylines than its sister show *Raw.* Under Heyman's leadership, *Smackdown* usually scored between 3.5 and 4.0 in the broadcast ratings, which were considered respectable numbers.

His editors, Vince and Stephanie McMahon, approved of this new direction and seemed content with continuing Heyman's course, but there was fear that *Smackdown* would soon revert to some of the cartoonish and over-the-top angles that had plagued *Raw* in recent months.

ROCK-HOGAN II ENDS IN CONTROVERSY

The Rock's Hollywood ring rust, Hulk Hogan's deteriorating back condition, and Vince McMahon's interference prevented this sequel at No Way Out from coming close to the original, held the previous year at WrestleMania X8. And if Montreal fans were hoping their favorite, the legendary "Hulkster," would avenge his 2002 loss in Toronto, they were sorely disappointed. Mr. McMahon was determined to spoil the night for Montreal fans once again.

Hogan was mounting a comeback and about to deliver his legdrop onto The Rock when the Bell Centre went dark inside. The referee was supposedly knocked unconscious during the ensuing chaos. When the lights came on again, McMahon walked onto the entrance ramp with a look of surprise and bewilderment.

The referee miraculously recovered and slid a steel chair to The Rock. As McMahon distracted Hogan, "The Great One" smashed "The Immortal One" with the chair. Rock scored the tainted victory, bringing his win-loss record against Hogan to 2-0. As it turned out, the referee was Northern Championship Wrestling (and WWE developmental) star Sylvan Grenier, who would later join Rene Dupree as a member of La Resistance on Raw.

The "Hulkster," however, was just happy to survive No Way Out in one piece—and never even tried to surpass the high standard set by Rock-Hogan I, which was voted Match of the Year by the readers of *PWI.* In an interview with wwe.com that night, Hogan admitted, "My back has been so damn bad. Five disks ... But now I can live to fight another day. I'm so happy I got through this, it's unreal."

And a showdown with Mr. McMahon was coming.

HASHIMOTO DEFEATS MUTO FOR ALL-JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN

Shinya Hashimoto learned a lesson the hard way: Keiji Muto can do virtually no wrong at Budokan Hall. At the start of their February 23 showdown in Tokyo, the All-Japan Triple Crown champion stalled for a full six minutes and lured Hashimoto out of the ring, where he ambushed him with a merciless running knee, which Muto calls the "shining wizard."

After ramming Hashimoto's head into the ringpost, Muto gouged his opponent's face with a pen until it was a crimson mask, and then blew green mist into his eyes. As Hashimoto lay semiconscious, the Tokyo fans—who aren't necessarily known for their bloodlust—enthusiastically cheered Muto.

So what was the deal? Actually, Muto is considered a legend at Budokan Hall, a long-time stronghold for All-Japan. Hashimoto, on the hand, is best known for competing in rival promotions, including New Japan and Zero-One.

Expectedly, the fans weren't happy when Hashimoto surprised Muto with a DDT, and nailed him with a scintillating spin kick. He then neutralized Muto with an armbar. The crowd rallied behind the champion, who reached the ropes for the break. Hashimoto ducked more of Muto's green mist, but fell prey to his shining

Grenier: Rock's secret weapon

"After ramming Hashimoto's head into the ringpost, Muto gouged his opponent's face with a pen until it was a crimson mask, and then blew green mist into his eyes."

Hashimoto was too tough for Muto

wizard again. But Hashimoto shocked Muto by using his own move, the shining wizard, against him. At the 20-minute mark, he planted a dazed Muto with a brainbuster to earn the three-count.

No, the Budokan Hall fans were not pleased. But they had to give Hashimoto his due. With that victory, Hashimoto became the first man to hold the All-Japan, IWGP, and NWA titles.

MONTREAL FANS SCORN HELMSLEY-STEINER REMATCH

WWE Raw champion Triple-H's title defense against Scott Steiner at the Royal Rumble had a very bad effect on No Way Out. Why? Because Steiner's disqualification victory inevitably required a rematch and, with the former WCW World champion's limited mobility no longer a secret, the Montreal fans were downright merciless at the February pay-per-view—even though Steiner probably put forth a greater effort at No Way Out and, in the opinion of some, turned in a better performance than Hulk Hogan, who was the most popular wrestler at the show.

When the fans weren't shouting, "Steiner sucks!" they were harassing referee Earl Hebner with "You screwed Bret!" chants. Steiner gained the distinct edge when he threw Triple-H over the top rope and off the ring apron. Back in the ring, he maintained the advantage with a fallaway slam. Adviser Ric Flair had to save the Raw champion by breaking the count.

With Triple-H screaming in the Steiner recliner, fellow Evolution members Randy Orton and Batista rushed into the ring and attacked "Big Poppa Pump." As Steiner warded off Orton and Batista, Helmsley hit him with the Raw title belt and pinned his challenger. Fortunately for the Montreal fans, and for the wrestlers who kept plugging away despite losing the crowd, this match lasted only 13 minutes—a full seven minutes shorter than their encounter at the Rumble.

Unfortunately for Steiner, No Way Out indicated that his career might never fully recover from that ill-fated Rumble outing.

TONY ALTIMORE DIES AT 74

"The Stamford Stomper" Tony Altimore, who gained fame as Lou Albano's partner in The Sicilians, died on February 18—only a short while after undergoing surgery for a detached retina. Altimore brought what could be best described as "sinister class" as a member of The Sicilians, with his fedora hats, gloves, and stylish jackets. Altimore and Albano often talked trash with their opponents as they puffed away on their slender cigars.

The Sicilians were primarily a midcard team, known better for their outlandish showmanship than championship achievements. The one exception to that, however, is their reign as WWWF U.S. tag team champions in July 1967. They beat Spiros Arion and Arnold Skoaland for the belts in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and lost to Arion and World champion Bruno Sammartino at the same venue two weeks later.

Vince McMahon Sr. rehired Altimore as a road agent in the late-1970s, and gave him the assignment of escorting his newest superstar, Hulk Hogan, in 1980. In his 2003 autobiography, Hogan portrayed Altimore as a colorful, fun-loving person. Noted Hogan, "Most of the time he was like a devil on my shoulder, egging me on to drink another beer or stay up raising hell, or to show up at the wrestling venue at the last possible minute. So Tony Altimore would turn out to be great company for me on the road, but not in the way Vince meant him to be."

After leaving the WWF, Altimore operated The Quest Factory, a training school in Orange, New Jersey, for a brief period in 1984.

"Altimore brought what could be best described as 'sinister class' as a member of The Sicilians, with his fedora hats, gloves, and stylish jackets."

NICK DINSMORE WINS OVW TITLE IN THREE-WAY MATCH

What did Abraham Lincoln say about how a "house divided cannot stand"? Nick Dinsmore has never claimed to have the wisdom of "Honest Abe," but the bearded grappler knew The Revolution's grasp on the Ohio Valley championship was slip-

Charlie Haas hangs on against Brock Lesnar
***Smackdown*, February 25, 2003**
Photo by Claus Andersen

Dinsmore thwarted a Revolution

ping. Damaja had agreed to defend the belt against long-time ally Doug Basham on February 19, and Dinsmore was added as a third participant to make it a three-way bout. Instead of fretting about a potential two-on-one situation, Dinsmore was confident the co-leaders of The Revolution could not work as a cohesive unit for long.

Dinsmore seemed wrong about that in the beginning. Johnny Spade and Kanyon attacked Dinsmore only a few minutes into the match, while Damaja and Basham prepared to double-team their rival. Dinsmore fought back, and had the champion and Basham on the defensive for a while, but it was impossible to overcome both men. Damaja and Basham pummeled the fan favorite for several minutes. He was at their mercy.

But when it was time to pin Dinsmore, an argument erupted between Damaja and Basham over who would make the cover. The two Revolution members began trading blows, enabling Dinsmore to surprise Damaja and suplex him to the mat for the pinfall. Dinsmore celebrated his OVW title victory as Damaja and Basham continued to argue.

As a result of his title loss, Damaja left The Revolution and feuded with Basham throughout the Ohio Valley. To make matters more complicated, WWE called up the two men in June, changed Damaja's name to *Danny* Basham, and forced them to compete as a team on Smackdown shows.

Back in Ohio Valley, Dinsmore was laughing.

"'I don't know if they're ready for me. If there's one person that can get MSNBC off the air, you're looking at it.'"

THE IWA SCOFFS AT WWC LAWSUIT

When Ray Gonzales became fed up with the World Wrestling Council last year, he didn't hesitate to make a jump to the promotion's main rival, the International Wrestling Association. The only problem was that Gonzales had a binding agreement with the WWC. But Gonzales claimed that, for a number of reasons, the WWC was guilty of breaching that contract.

To avoid the legal hassle, the IWA requested that Gonzales wear a mask and compete as a different character. He adopted Fenix as his name and became just as big a star in the IWA as he was in the WWC. But Gonzales competing as Fenix was every bit as convincing as Dusty Rhodes masquerading as The Midnight Rider. Virtually every fan in Puerto Rico knew Gonzales and Fenix were the same person.

That's when the WWC filed a lawsuit against not Gonzales, but the IWA and its television network, Telemundo. They were not intimidated, to put it mildly. The IWA went ahead and unmasked Fenix altogether, allowing him to compete as Ray Gonzales again.

JESSE VENTURA LANDS MSNBC TALK SHOW

"I'm going to educate 'em, entertain 'em, and tell people the truth," Jesse Ventura told Jay Leno on the February 5 broadcast of *The Tonight Show.* Added Ventura, "I don't know if they're ready for me. If there's one person that can get MSNBC off the air, you're looking at it."

With that provocative statement, Ventura finally let the rest of the world know what had been the worst-kept secret in the cable news industry for a couple of weeks: He would be hosting his own prime time talk show on MSNBC. Executives considered Ventura to be a signature personality, much like Bill O'Reilly on the Fox News Channel and Larry King on CNN—and MSNBC had been getting walloped in the ratings as of late.

"The Body/Mind" didn't divulge a start date for the program, but the deal quickly

Doug Delicious headlocks Brock Singleton
Championship Pro Wrestling, February 1, 2003
Photo by Timothy A. Walker

Jesse loves to talk

prompted many comments from media critics. "Ventura would seem to be a good logical way to go," Brooke Gladstone, a co-host of National Public Radio's *On The Media,* told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune.* "He's got crossover appeal, has name recognition, has a funny way of talking, and people love that illusion of no-nonsense, that schtick of sincerity. Both he and O'Reilly have that bluster of authenticity about them."

Ventura served one term as Minnesota governor, from 1999 to 2003, but decided not to run for re-election. His approval ratings, which had held steady in the 70 percent range during his first two years in office, had plummeted to the low-40s by the summer of 2002. His insistence on participating in outside projects while governor, his volatile relationships with both Democrats and Republicans, his blunt outspokenness, and a poor economy all combined to drive down his poll numbers.

IN OTHER NEWS

Kid Kash defeated Sonny Siaki for the NWA-TNA X belt ... TNA officials asked Jimmy Yang to leave when he refused to sign a standard one-night contract ... The Sandman appeared at the request of TNA matchmaker J.J. Dillon to battle Raven and the rest of Vince Russo's SEX faction ... Disco Inferno (Glenn Gilberti) and Konnan also arrived in the promotion ... Edge suffered a neck injury and was expected to undergo spinal surgery ... WWE released D-Lo Brown and signed one-legged phenom Tenacious Z (Zach Gowen) ... Tommy Dreamer joined WWE Creative on a trial basis ... WWE posted a $16-million loss in its second consecutive negative quarter, grossing only $95.6-million compared to $100.2-million during the same quarter in 2002 ... Linda McMahon confirmed the *Raw* 10th anniversary program was the highest-rated special that WWE had ever produced for TNN ... Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas beat Los Guerreros for the Smackdown tag team title in Philadelphia ... Matt Hardy defeated Billy Kidman for the cruiserweight championship at No Way Out ... Major League Wrestling champion Satoshi Kojima pinned John Tenta (previously known as Earthquake) at an All-Japan show, the first time an outside title had been defended in a main event for that promotion in more than three decades ... Ace Darling and Striker beat The S.A.T. for the East Coast Wrestling Association tag team belts in Wilmington, Delaware ... Chris Hero defeated C.M. Punk for the IWA Mid-South title in Clarksville, Indiana ... Former Luchador and referee Shadito Cruz—father of Brazo de Oro, Brazo de Plata, and Brazo de Platino—died of pneumonia.

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH: THE WORLD COMES TO AN END

Plagued by financial problems since its grand opening in 2000, and projected to lose another $9.5-million in 2003, The World—WWE's restaurant and entertainment complex—closed its doors for the final time. The McMahons came to the decision after WWE posted a $16-million loss in fourth fiscal quarter of 2002.

Unfortunately for the McMahons, they opened The World, then known as WWF New York, at the start of the current recession, and were forced to experiment with various business models in an effort to turn a profit. Also, WWF New York, located in Times Square, suffered a major downturn as a result of the 9/11 attacks. But the deathblow occurred when WWE suspected embezzlement at the nightclub. According to forensic accounting specialists, manager Kenton Jenkins had allegedly funneled $437,000 in restaurant checks to a bogus construction business. Jenkins was arrested in November 2002.

Finally, the McMahons changed the name of the establishment to The World in order to try to attract a non-wrestling crowd. That didn't work, either. Investors were, understandably, losing confidence in the venture.

CEO Linda McMahon commented that WWE would invest further in overseas expansion, rather than spend more capital on The World. WWE planned to sublease the property until its own lease ran out in 2017.

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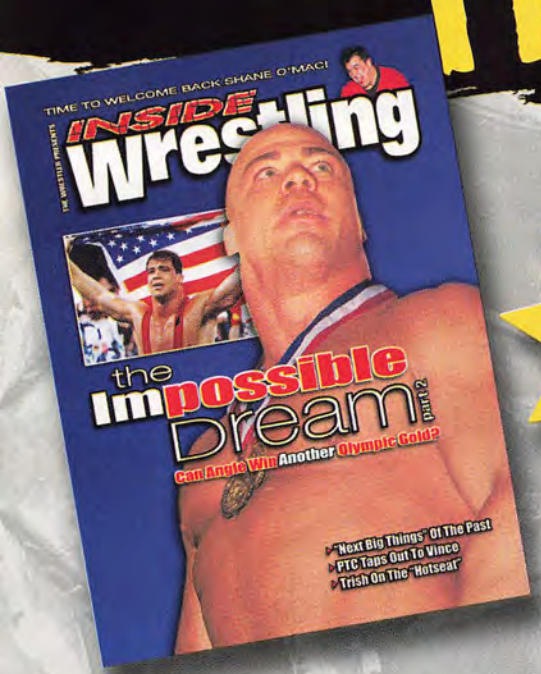
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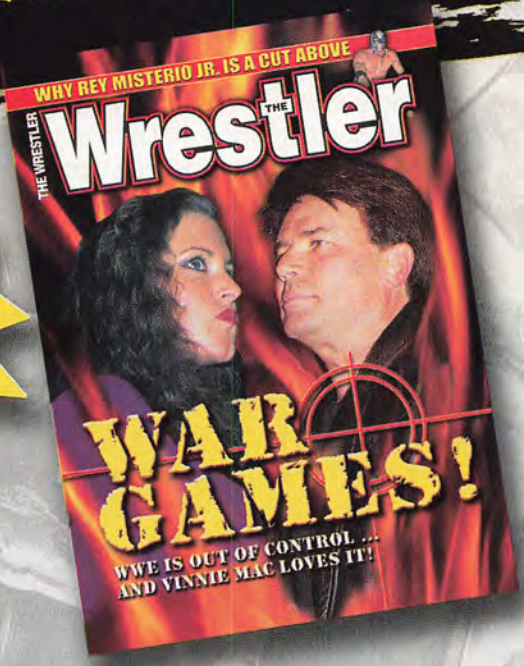

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WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: RICK MICHAELS

Steve Austin, Mick Foley, and Arn Anderson are only a few famous wrestlers who have accumulated enough serious injuries during their careers to warrant their retirements. These instances are considered tragic ... but at least these superstars have had several years of six- and seven-figure salaries to provide soft landings. But what about the hundreds of indy wrestlers whose love for the business is their only profit?

Take Rick Michaels. When Michaels faced James Storm at the Fairgrounds Coliseum in Nashville, there was a stipulation that one combatant had to throw the other off the upper balcony to win the match. Michaels was the poor sap who went over the balcony and landed hard on the concrete floor. He suffered a back injury upon impact.

Ever the trooper, the former NWA Wildside champion honored his scheduled dates until he was diagnosed with either a ruptured or herniated disk, a condition complicated by an infection that had settled around the disk and spread to his legs. A pick was inserted into his body so he could receive antibiotics throughout the day. Michaels couldn't walk at first, but was eventually able to use a walker. He lost nearly 40 pounds during the ordeal.

Despite the adversity, Michaels agreed to fight Georgia heels as NWA Wildside's new CEO. "Being involved in the behind-the-scenes stuff in Wildside helps take my mind off things," said Michaels. "Even though I can't get in that ring yet, I can still make life a living hell for Jeff Bailey and his so-called Elite."

This Michaels is one tough guy

Fortunately, Michaels was able to undergo surgery to repair a damaged nerve and disk tissue, alleviating severe sciatica pain ... and keeping alive his hopes for a comeback.

MATCH OF THE MONTH: BROCK LESNAR & CHRIS BENOIT VS. KURT ANGLE & SHELTON BENJAMIN & CHARLIE HAAS

Kurt Angle had two extraordinary rivals gunning for him at No Way Out, as Brock Lesnar, his upcoming challenger at WrestleMania XIX, and Chris Benoit, who pushed him to the limit the previous month at the Royal Rumble, tried their best to humble the WWE Smackdown champion. Angle, however, had the benefit of having *two* partners in this bout, Smackdown tag team champions Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas. (Edge was originally scheduled to make it a six-man tag, but neck and spinal injuries kept him out of the match.)

Lesnar corners Benjamin

Benoit was the first man to seize the distinct advantage for his team, hoisting Angle over with a German suplex and drilling Benjamin with three rolling Germans. Haas simply tried to stay out of "The Rabid Wolverine's" path.

Benjamin, not Angle, was the first to really put Brock Lesnar on the defensive, hitting the former Smackdown champ directly in the nose with a superkick. Later, Benoit fell victim to a triple-team effort in Team Angle's corner. When Benoit finally made the tag to Lesnar, the Minneapolis native carried over Angle with an incredible belly-to-belly suplex, and did the same to Benjamin.

Angle and Benoit traded a series of anklelocks and crossfaces, with Benoit finally snaring Angle in what seemed to be an inescapable crossface. Haas saved Angle, but was caught in the crossface himself. Lesnar intercepted Angle with an F5 as Benoit forced Haas into submission. Unfortunately for Angle, he lost more than a match on this night. Angle aggravated pre-existing neck problems when he went headfirst into a turnbuckle. It was soon determined that Angle would have to consider spinal surgery ... and maybe even retirement.

Bill DeMott stymies Billy Kidman
***Smackdown*, February 25, 2003**
Photo by Claus Andersen

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH: MADMAN PONDO MEETS HIS MATCH

Over the past dozen years, Madman Pondo has gained a reputation as perhaps the most fearless wrestler to compete regularly in the Mid-South, Midwest, or Japan. Pondo is willing to face absolutely anyone in any kind of match. Chain matches? He is your strongest link. Inside a cage? That's the best place for him. Wrestling barefoot on shards of broken glass? He's your man.

Is Pondo impervious to pain?

Most of his battles are not just hardcore, but on the verge of sickening. It's impossible to tell how many buckets of blood that Ian Rotten, his top rival in IWA Mid-South, has lost against the maniac. No one thought Pondo would ever meet his match in another competitor ... or meet a type of match that could stop him.

All of that changed when he met J.C. Bailey, a rising star in Bad 2 the Bone Wrestling and Combat Zone Wrestling. Bailey got his shot at the master in a circus death match at IWA Mid-South's "Ultra Styles Clash" weekend. While the ring had been broken in a previous bout, an 18-foot-high scaffold still loomed high above. Approximately 20,000 yards of barbed wire had been weaved into a net that hung underneath.

The carnage began when Bailey shoved Pondo off the first level of the two-tier scaffold, and followed through with a senton bomb onto his foe in the barbed-wire netting. Bailey and Pondo screamed as the ring crew freed them from the bloody barbs. Pondo retaliated by suplexing Bailey from the top of the scaffold and into the wire. Finally, the match was declared over when the crew had to cut them out of the grisly mesh.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"I guess I can compare it to walking into your mother's home while she has your favorite meal cooking. It lets you know that you're in a safe and comfortable place. It's very much like that. After I lost the mask in WCW, I wasn't quite myself, because I was missing part of myself."

—Rey Misterio Jr., describing how it felt to don the mask again in WWE years after being unmasked in WCW, "Press Conference," *PWI,* June 2003

"I'd say it would have to be over 100. In Texas, we were poor and they were cheap. I ate them every day until we got our developmental deals."

—American Dragon, estimating how many consecutive days he had eaten Ramen noodles, "12 Questions," *PWI,* June 2003

"You know, almost 30 years ago, I broke my back in a plane crash and some of the doctors said I'd never wrestle again. They were a little off-base on that, I'd say. I probably wrestled more than 6,000 matches since then, and I still feel each and every one ... Do I think I have what it takes to make one more run to the top? Yes, I do. But I don't want to do it right now. I'm happy with what I'm doing today."

—Ric Flair, explaining that his role in Evolution is more important than his own championship success, "Q & A," *The Wrestler,* July 2003

"Having a wrestler as my father was great. My friends and I would pack into the truck and go all over the place with my father to watch him wrestle. I was definitely brought up in the old school tradition, because respect was a big thing with my father and the other guys."

—Mike Kruel, discussing the impact that his father, Bodyguard For Hire, has made on his career, "Introducing," *The Wrestler,* July 2003

"When I went to the ring before Brock [Lesnar] beat the living hell out of me, I was already having some back problems, and that night I couldn't even pick my right foot up and go up the steps there, because my back was out and there were five disks screwed up in there. So getting through that thing with Brock, to me, was a major accomplishment."

—Hulk Hogan, recalling his physical condition when he faced Brock Lesnar in August 2002, wwe.com

"Growing up, I thought that everybody died of a heart attack because … I had 14 people in my family who suffer from this heart condition called angina, or heart disease in general. I didn't realize until about six years ago that heart attacks aren't the natural way to die."

—Kurt Angle, relating how premature deaths in his family affected his life, cnn.com

"Sometimes you take these breaks—the little hiccups in your career—and you might come back stronger than you were before. And I believe that with Edge … This will set him back a bit, but when he comes back, he'll be stronger than he was before. He's very talented, and he loves the hell out of the business. He'll rise higher than he was this time."

—Steve Austin, endorsing the injured Edge as a future main-eventer, wwe.com

"All of a sudden, six months after I filed my lawsuit [against WCW], we had an African-American World champion, African-American commissioner, and a Mexican cruiserweight champion … You have to remember, in the history of WCW there had never been minority officers in that company, and it was based in Atlanta, Georgia."

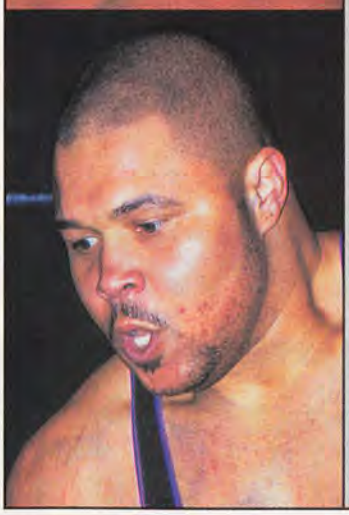
—Sonny Ono, taking credit for some of the progressive changes in WCW, *Get In The Ring* radio show

"Vince [McMahon] basically said that I was a real mortician so I should know what they look like. The look and urn and all that stuff is all stuff I came up with. The voice is the funny part. I don't know where that came from."

—Bill Moody, tracing the roots of his Paul Bearer character, wrestlingobserver.com

"It's easier to get a hold of President Bush than Al Snow."

—Hawk Younkins, commenting on his relationship with *Tough Enough's* head trainer, *Pro Wrestling Torch*



WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Steve Austin: Everyone forgave him
Shinya Hashimoto: Survived the shining wizard
Nick Dinsmore: Squelched The Revolution
Jesse Ventura: Got paid to talk
Rick Michaels: Might yet fight another day

LOSERS

Paul Heyman: Too volatile for Creative
Scott Steiner: No redemption in Montreal
Damaja: The damaj was done
D-Lo Brown: Vince was down on the Brown
Madman Pondo: Circus death match was no fun

"There are some people in the wrestling world that can do all right [in a mixed martial arts environment]. None come to mind right now, but I'm sure there are a few. Goldberg is one that should definitely stick with wrestling."

—Tank Abbott, advising his former WCW rival to remain on his current career track, *Wrestle Zone* radio show

"Well, I didn't realize I could actually rip a cell door off the hinges until I did it. It was one day that the prison officers were all on strike … I got out. I thought, *I'm hungry.* I went straight to the kitchen. I broke into the kitchen [and] I took a whole heap of food. I went back to the guys in the cells and started feeding them through the holes in the cells. Then I went back and took a whole heap more food with me."

—Nathan Jones, proving he was a true humanitarian while serving time in an Australian prison, wwe.com

"Jeff Jarrett is in no harm. What you people don't understand is I love Jeff Jarrett. I am doing this for Jeff Jarrett's own good. I am the uncle to Jeff Jarrett's kids … Let's face it, Jeff Jarrett doesn't know who he is, but I know who Jeff Jarrett is, and Jeff Jarrett is my friend."

—Vince Russo, denying he was sending his SEX goons after the NWA champion, Total Nonstop Action

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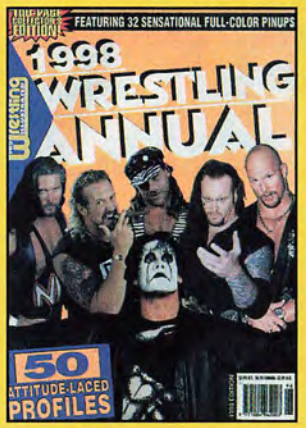

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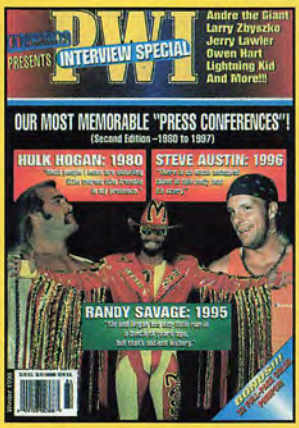

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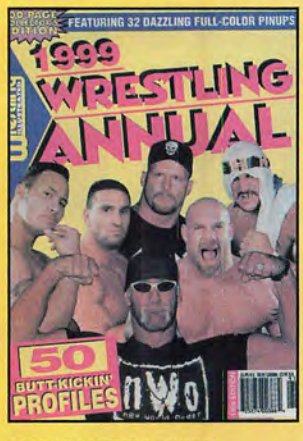

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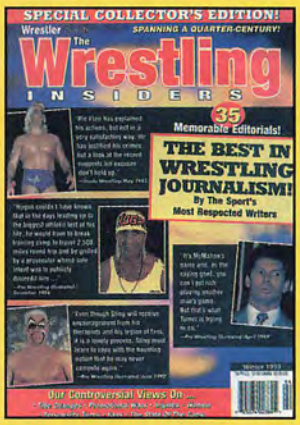
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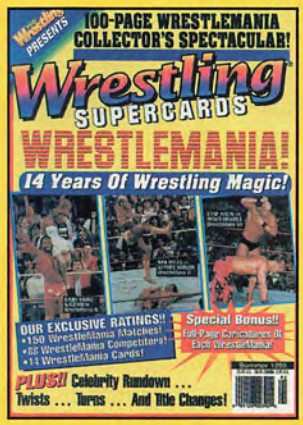

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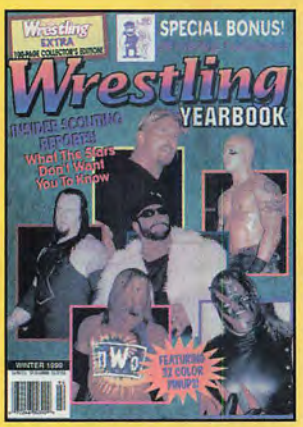

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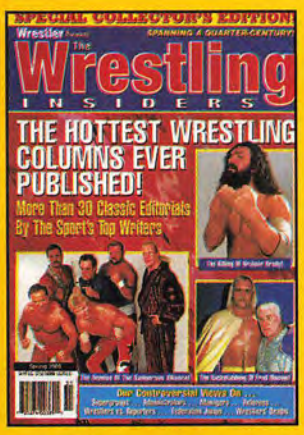
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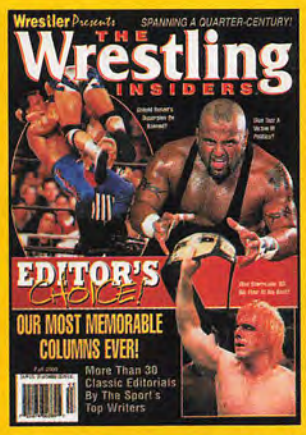

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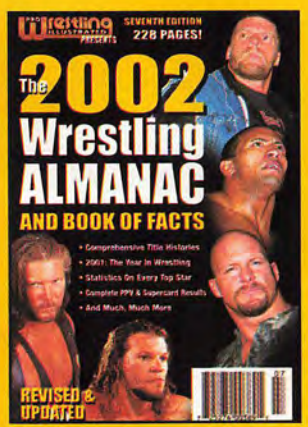
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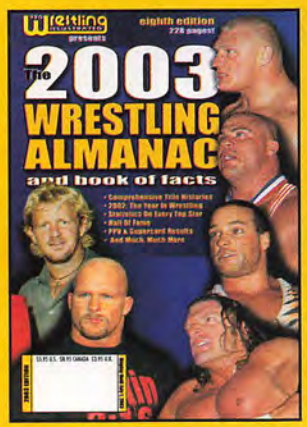

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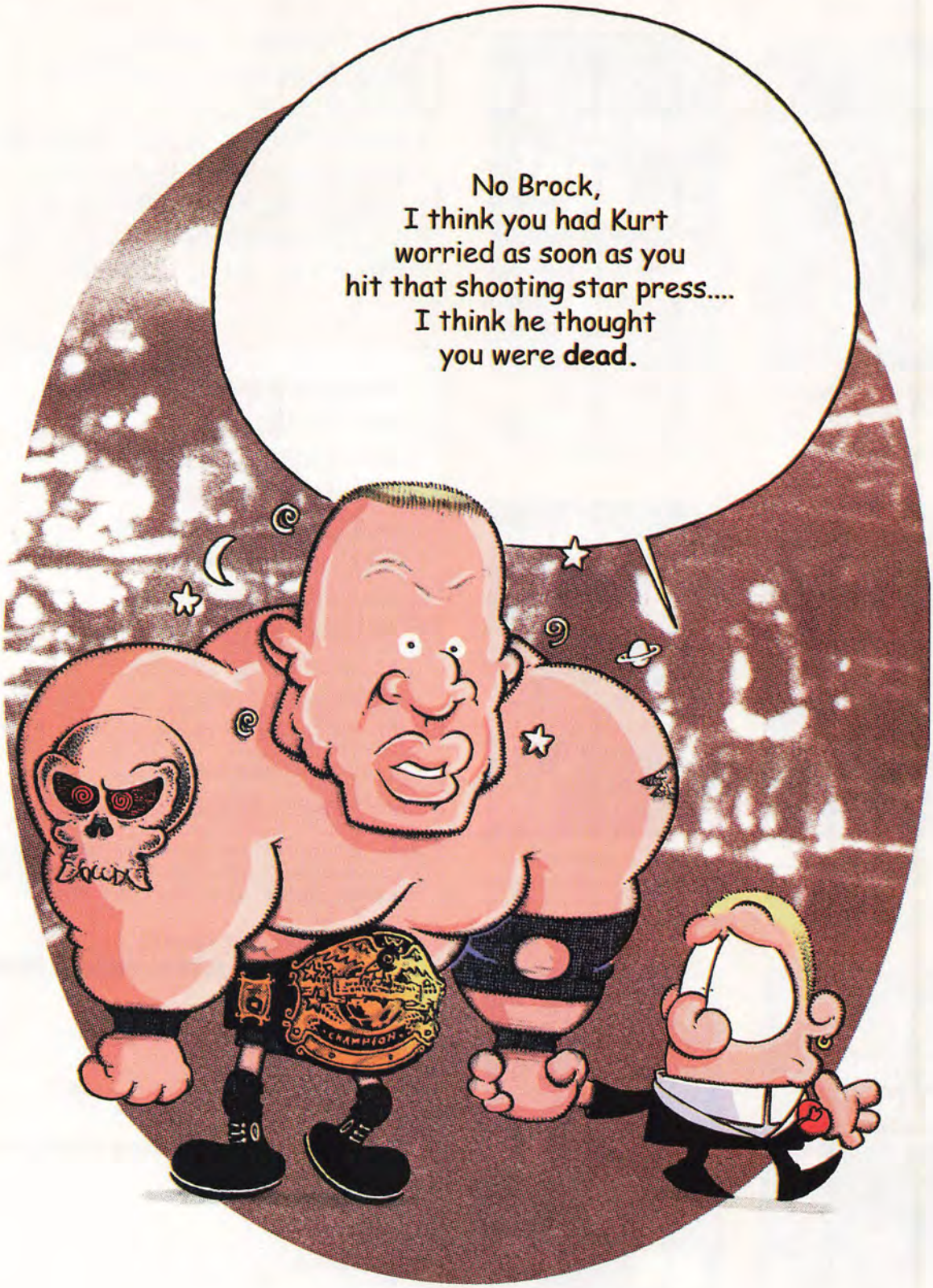

No Brock,
I think you had Kurt
worried as soon as you
hit that shooting star press....
I think he thought
you were **dead**.
CHAMPION

march

THE MONTH OF March was full of heroic performances, selfless acts, and classy endings. That's quite a statement about what has sometimes been termed a ruthless business. As always, WrestleMania brought out the best in the performers on its stage, but there were plenty of praiseworthy deeds to commend throughout the wrestling world.

Steve Austin, whose comeback was sadly cut short, gave The Rock a clean win at WrestleMania before accepting a supporting role with the Raw brand. WWE Smackdown champion Kurt Angle risked paralysis to wrestle Brock Lesnar at 'Mania. Hulk Hogan iced his back and knees one more time to battle long-time employer Vince McMahon in a bloody streetfight. The Undertaker gutted through his own handicaps to meet The Big Show and A-Train in a handicap match, and extend his undefeated streak at WrestleMania to 11-0. Then there was Edge, who went under the surgeon's scalpel for the sake of his sport.

Like WWE, NWA-TNA saluted U.S. troops who went to fight the war in Iraq. Jim Duggan and Goldylocks were two unlikely individuals who led stirring tributes. Kenta Kobashi won the Global Honored Crown, and former champ Mitsuharu Misawa declined a rematch, content to let his rival have the glory. And, "Sailor" Art Thomas, who carried himself with dignity throughout his career, died of cancer at age 79.

On March 31, the day after WrestleMania, the industry faced an uncertain future. Could Bill Goldberg boost WWE, and therefore send the entire industry into an up cycle? Or would that be too large a burden for "Da Man"?

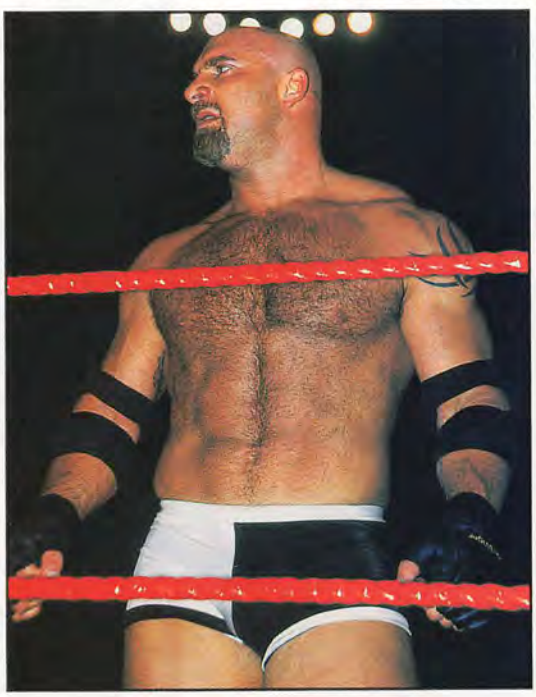
BILL GOLDBERG SIGNS WITH WWE

After news leaked that Bill Goldberg had a meeting with Vince McMahon inside a hotel room, the former WCW World champion's contract negotiations with WWE became the subject of rampant speculation. When one of Goldberg's relatives—attending a Los Angeles Lakers game—supposedly confirmed that "Da Man" had signed with the company, it was announced on a radio station and posted on the Internet almost immediately. That turned out to be a premature report, but "Da Man" finally cut a deal shortly before WrestleMania XIX.

Two years after the demise of WCW, Goldberg made his WWE debut on the March 31 edition of *Raw,* the night after WrestleMania XIX. The Rock, who had accomplished his goal of finally defeating Steve Austin at WrestleMania the previous night, arrogantly stated that he had accomplished everything he had sought to do in his wrestling career. Obviously, Hollywood—not WWE—was foremost on The Rock's agenda.

That's when Goldberg made his trademark entrance, complete with pyrotechnics. He marched to the ring and said, "So, Rock, you want to

"Da Man" finally arrived



"It soon became clear that Austin's so-called injuries were not part of any storyline, that he wasn't just jumping to Smackdown. They were all too real... there was no amount of rehabilitation that could repair his serious spinal injuries."

know who's next? … *You're* next!" He then plowed into The Rock with a devastating spear. "The Great One" held his ribs and writhed in pain as Goldberg returned to the backstage area.

During an interview with wwe.com immediately after that edition of *Raw,* Goldberg was asked if a near-altercation with Triple-H at a licensing convention a few years ago would prevent him from working with the Raw champion. Responded Goldberg, "Business is business."

STEVE AUSTIN RETIRES FROM ACTIVE COMPETITION

Many fans were shocked when The Rock cleanly pinned Steve Austin at WrestleMania XIX, especially when "Stone-Cold" was in the midst of what seemed to be his last great comeback in WWE. In fact, that was probably the most deflating aspect of the entire pay-per-view.

This was compounded the following night on *Raw* when General Manager Eric Bischoff produced documentation from a doctor that catalogued Austin's extensive list of nagging injuries and degenerative conditions associated with his neck. Bischoff didn't even bother to mention Austin's notoriously bad knees before announcing that, because of liability issues, "Stone-Cold" would no longer be allowed to compete for the Raw brand.

It soon became clear that Austin's so-called injuries were not part of any storyline, that he wasn't just jumping to Smackdown. They were all too real. Despite the fact that Austin had stepped up his training regimen during his eight-month hiatus from WWE, and had streamlined his body into a buff 265 pounds, there was no amount of rehabilitation that could repair his serious spinal injuries.

Many of Austin's physical problems stem from SummerSlam 1997, when Owen Hart tombstone piledrived "Stone-Cold" into the canvas, causing a compression of his neck and vertebrae, temporary paralysis, and a bout with spinal shock syndrome. Some specialists advised Austin to retire at that time. He underwent major surgery in early-2000.

Some insiders believe it's still conceivable that the former WWF World champion could wrestle another match, especially if it meant a dream showdown with Bill Goldberg, who, ironically, made his *Raw* debut on the same night that Bischoff forced Austin's retirement. Austin himself has not totally ruled out such a possibility.

LESNAR BEATS ANGLE FOR SMACKDOWN BELT AT WRESTLEMANIA XIX

After recuperating from knee surgery, WWE Smackdown champion Kurt Angle reaggravated an old neck injury at No Way Out, placing his scheduled title defense against Brock Lesnar at WrestleMania XIX in serious jeopardy. Suffering pain and nerve problems in his left shoulder and arm, Angle was told that two herniated disks were pressing against his spinal cord. Dr. Lloyd Youngblood suggested vertebrae fusion surgery and advised Angle to consider retirement.

Only a couple of weeks before WrestleMania, Kurt Angle asked Vince McMahon to allow his Smackdown title defense to go ahead as planned. Angle reasoned that if his career had to end, he wanted to go out on the industry's greatest stage before announcing his retirement or, in the best-case scenario, taking a 10- to 12-month hiatus for spinal surgery. The champion knew he was risking paralysis by facing Lesnar at 'Mania.

Incredibly, Angle didn't adopt a conservative approach once he got in the ring against Lesnar in Seattle. Angle, a 1996 Olympic gold medalist, and Lesnar, the 2000 NCAA heavyweight champion, traded basic moves

"Stone-Cold's" neck tapped out

and holds in the early going.

Lesnar went for a high-impact offense too soon, tossing Angle with a press-slam, but failing with an F5 attempt. Angle quickly turned the attempt into an anklelock and then a half-Boston crab. He went for an Angle slam and made the cover, yet Lesnar kicked out.

Angle and Lesnar both took big risks

Late in the match, Lesnar climbed the turnbuckles to deliver a shooting star press. But the flight was too far for the exhausted Lesnar, who crashed headfirst into the canvas before reaching Angle. Nevertheless, Lesnar managed to execute the F5 and pin Angle at 21:02. The new Smackdown champ was diagnosed with a concussion at a local hospital.

EDGE UNDERGOES SPINAL SURGERY

Smackdown superstar Edge narrowly avoided major shoulder surgery through intense rehabilitation and was competing with an injured knee, but no amount of willpower could keep him off the disabled list in March. While overcompensating for his bad knee, Edge injured his neck, a condition that was no doubt brought on by dishing out and absorbing too many spears, German suplexes, and other high-impact moves during his career.

Dr. Lloyd Youngblood discovered that bone spurs were touching Edge's spinal cord and cutting off several nerves. As a result, Edge had practically no feeling in his left arm. The Toronto native underwent surgery on March 10.

"He said it looked like someone had taken a corkscrew to my spine, and my disks just looked like a shattered cork," Edge said in an interview with wwe.com. "That's why it took five hours instead of 3½."

During the surgery, a portion of Edge's hipbone was grafted between two existing vertebrae, solving the nerve problem for at least a few more years. Dr. Youngblood said it would take between nine and 12 months for the 29-year-old superstar to recover. The timing of the injury was unfortunate for Edge, who seemed on the verge of main event status after nearly five years with WWE.

Edge joined WWE's dubious club of spinal surgery veterans, including Steve Austin, Rhyno, Hardcore Holly, Chris Benoit, Scotty Too Hotty, Lita, and, soon to be added to the list, Kurt Angle. He hoped to be back in the ring by WrestleMania XX.

WWE RAW CHAMPION TRIPLE-H BEATS BOOKER T IN 'MANIA SHOWDOWN

Was Booker T worthy of a WWE Raw title shot? Raw champion Triple-H insisted that he wasn't, even stooping so low as to briefly play the race card against Booker T. But video packages airing on *Raw* and *Confidential* that detailed Booker's harsh childhood and the robbery that once landed him in prison did not make fans think badly of him. In fact, Booker's triumph over adversity made him seem all the more worthy.

Besides, the five-time WCW champion had been in WWE for two years and still hadn't received a Raw title shot on pay-per-view. Finally, though, Booker would receive a title shot on WWE's greatest stage: WrestleMania.

Booker T wobbled Triple-H, first dissecting him with chops and punches, followed by a high backdrop to the canvas. Triple-H couldn't catch a breather outside, either, because "The Bookerman" shoved him into the ringpost. Back inside the ring, Booker leveled the champion with a series

"'He said it looked like someone had taken a corkscrew to my spine, and my disks just looked like a shattered cork... That's why it took five hours instead of 3½.'"

"It was one of the most brutal matches of Hulk Hogan's career. He had never been forced through a table with his own move, the legdrop."

of roundhouse and spin kicks.

Yet Booker might have been too eager for his own good. He mistimed a sidekick and crotched himself on the top rope. Triple-H's adviser, Ric Flair, pushed Booker onto the metal ringsteps. That's when "The Cerebral Assassin" applied pressure onto Booker's injured leg with an Indian deathlock. Booker never fully recovered. He used his final burst of energy to catch Triple-H with the Harlem hangover. The ubiquitous Flair, however, placed Helmsley's foot on the rope. The groggy Raw champ recovered just enough to execute the pedigree for the three-count at 18:34.

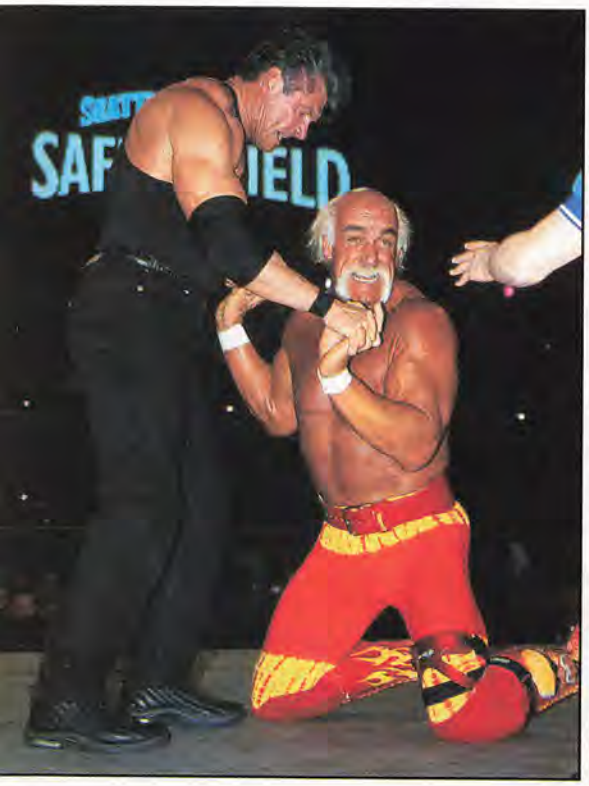
Despite Triple-H's tainted victory, Booker would have to wait a while for a rematch. Kevin Nash and Bill Goldberg were rumored to be Helmsley's next challengers.

KOBASHI WINS GLOBAL HONORED CROWN FROM MISAWA

He was recovering from yet another knee surgery. Physicians urged him to retire. He has trouble just climbing stairs. Yet Kenta Kobashi wrestled an outstanding match against GHC champion Mitsuharu Misawa on March 1 at Tokyo's Budokan Hall.

The 15-year veteran had wanted to prove himself against Misawa for quite some time. Many consider Misawa the greatest All-Japan Triple Crown champion ever, while Kobashi was criticized for defending against inferior opponents during his two reigns. In 2000, Kobashi voluntarily ended his second Triple Crown reign in order to sign with Misawa's fledgling Pro Wrestling NOAH. Three years later, he made that defection worthwhile.

Two decades in the making!



Misawa was merciless, however, using a tiger suplex to hoist Kobashi from the rampway and drop him to the arena floor. Neither man could move for a while. But Kobashi soon gained the advantage with a maneuver he invented, the burning hammer, which is an upside-down version of the Death Valley driver that finishes like a brainbuster. The 6'2", 265-pounder followed that with his signature lariat, an equally effective move.

Despite the technical mastery of the former partners, the match degenerated as Kobashi and Misawa traded vicious punches. Kobashi ignored his suffering knees and used his superior endurance to wear down Misawa and score the pinfall.

Unfortunately for NOAH fans, Misawa had already announced that the March 1 encounter would be their final singles match. Kobashi, as the new holder of the Global Honored Crown, braced for title defenses against former champs Jun Akiyama and Yoshinari Ogawa, as well as Akira Taue.

HULK HOGAN AND VINCE McMAHON SETTLE 20-YEAR-OLD SCORE

It was one of the most brutal matches of Hulk Hogan's career. He had never been forced through a table with his own move, the legdrop. And he needed only one legdrop to defeat The Iron Sheik, Ric Flair, and countless others. At WrestleMania XIX, he needed three legdrops to beat his long-time boss, Vincent Kennedy McMahon.

Surprisingly, Hogan lost an initial test of strength to McMahon and was then hurled into a security barricade and ringpost. Hogan countered by ramming McMahon into the ringpost and bashing him with a steel chair.

After returning to the ring, Hogan repeatedly punched the gash on McMahon's forehead, causing the blood to flow even more. McMahon retaliated by smashing a steel chair across Hogan's back and neutralized him with a low blow. Vinnie Mac bashed Hogan with television monitors and positioned him on the Spanish announcers' table. Cupping his hands to his ear to mock "Hulkamania," the 58-year-old McMahon unleashed a legdrop from the ladder, sending himself and Hogan crashing through splintered wood.

McMahon scored two near-falls. He grabbed a steel pipe from under the apron, but Hogan caught him with a low blow. Roddy Piper, wearing a trenchcoat in his

Test press-slams Chris Jericho
***Raw*, March 3, 2003**

"America's Most Wanted, especially Harris, seemed to be too much for Triple-X on this night."

first WWE appearance in seven years, grabbed the pipe, faked toward McMahon, and hit Hogan over the head with it. After Piper fled and Hogan escaped a pin attempt, McMahon kicked referee Brian Hebner through the ropes and motioned for Sylvan Grenier, the bogus official who had helped him at No Way Out. But Hogan escaped yet another pin attempt, "hulked up," and knocked out McMahon with one punch. Three legdrops later, Hebner was back in position to count Hogan's pinfall of the WWE chairman at 20:58.

ART THOMAS DIES AT 79

Sitting at ringside for Vincent J. McMahon's television tapings in Washington, D.C., may decades ago, Art Thomas was an impressive figure, boasting a weightlifter's body inside a spotless Navy uniform. When long-time fans learned of his death on March 20, many of them remembered how Thomas leaped from his front row seat to confront top heel Steve Stanlee during that show. That was Thomas' big break, and he went on to have a respectable career despite the poor treatment of African-Americans in the business during that era.

He earned the name "Sailor" Art Thomas because he served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, unloading munitions in the Pacific. After his discharge, Thomas began lifting weights, competed in AAU bodybuilding contests in the 1950s, and eventually became a wrestler. He was in his late-30s by the time of his debut.

"Sailor" Art was nothing if not strong

Thomas had runs in Memphis and Florida, and won the Texas State belt in 1962. He eventually settled down in Madison, Wisconsin, near the wrestling hotbeds of Milwaukee, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Chicago. In 1963, he teamed with John Paul Henning to capture the Toronto-based International tag team title. Thomas was also a frequent partner of Bobo Brazil and Dory Dixon.

The 6'3", 260-pounder was very popular in Indianapolis, where he feuded with Dick the Bruiser, and won the WWA championship from Baron Von Raschke in 1972. He also challenged NWA World champion Lou Thesz and WWWF World champion Bruno Sammartino. He wrestled his final match at an AWA event in Chicago in 1981.

Thomas died in a hospice care facility in Madison, Wisconsin, only a month after being diagnosed with cancer.

CHRISTOPHER DANIELS & LOW-KI WIN VACANT NWA TAG TEAM TITLE

When Elix Skipper and Low-Ki's title defense against Brian Lee and Slash ended in controversy on February 5, the NWA tag team title was held up. On March 12, the two top contending teams—Triple-X and America's Most Wanted—battled for the championship at the Fairgrounds Coliseum in Nashville.

Chris Harris and James Storm were no doubt expecting to face the former champs, Skipper and Low-Ki. But, taking advantage of the "Freebirds loophole," Triple-X settled on Low-Ki and Christopher Daniels, while Skipper remained at ringside.

Daniels and Low-Ki double-teamed Storm for the first several minutes. Storm fought back, however, and finally made the tag to Harris. He mounted a high-energy offense against Triple-X, executing a full-nelson slam on Daniels for a near-fall, and following that with a power bomb. Low-Ki barely made the save.

Harris gave Daniels another power bomb, and held him down long enough for Storm to deliver a legdrop from the top turnbuckle. Skipper had to interfere to break up the pin attempt. Low-Ki went for a handspring elbow, but the fast-thinking Harris caught him with a tackle. Then Harris trapped Daniels in a sharpshooter.

Skipper tried to interfere with a chair at that point, but Storm kicked it away. Storm and Skipper brawled on the arena floor. Daniels even began tapping out to Harris' sharpshooter, though the referee didn't see it. America's Most Wanted, especially Harris, seemed to be too much for Triple-X on this night.

But Triple-X had one more trick in the playbook. After Harris gave up on the sharpshooter, Low-Ki hit him with a tag title

Justin Credible blisters Steve Corino
Premier Wrestling Federation, March 16, 2003
Photo by Joe Zanolle

Rough night in ROH for Daniels and company

belt and scored the pinfall at the 12-minute mark. Low-Ki and Daniels were declared the new champions.

THE GROUP HUMBLES THE PROPHECY AT ROH'S "NIGHT OF CHAMPIONS"

The beginning of an epic feud, a major title change, and plenty of fast-paced action were the hallmarks of Ring of Honor's "Night Of Champions," which took place on March 22 at the Murphy Recreational Center in Philadelphia.

The epic feud began when Michael Shane—a member of The Group—confronted Christopher Daniels, leader of the hated Prophecy. Shane had been at the hospital due to a stomach virus and dehydration, and Daniels was surprised by his appearance. Yet Daniels went from being surprised to stunned when Shane clocked him with a swift superkick. Meanwhile, C.W. Anderson, Shane's cohort in The Group, hit Prophecy member Allison Danger with a hard left hand. According to Steve Corino, his Group's takeover of ROH had begun.

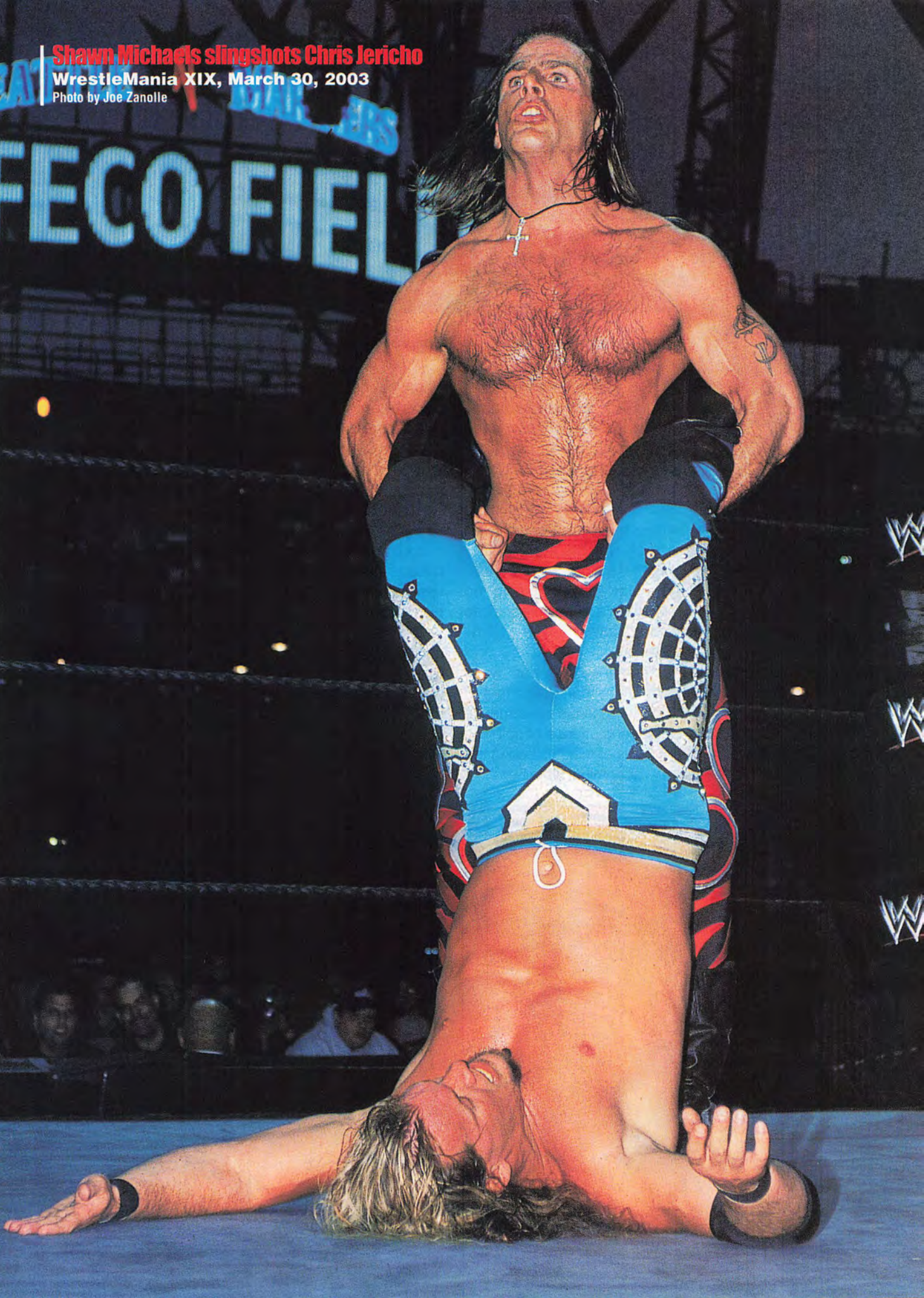
Immediately following that altercation, Samoa Joe—another member of The Group—faced Ring of Honor champ Xavier. After 12 minutes of action, Joe succeeded in choking out Xavier and claiming the ROH singles title. Despite the fact that Joe was better known on the West Coast, the Philly fans were grateful that someone had finally defeated the cocky Xavier, who had reigned since September of the previous year. Another piece had fallen into place for The Group.

"Despite the fact that Joe was better known on the West Coast, the Philly fans were grateful that someone had finally defeated the cocky Xavier."

The victory was even more impressive considering that Joe had already teamed with Group teammates C.W. Anderson and Jack Victory earlier on the show, battling Da Hit Squad and Homicide to a violent no-contest. Also of note, Prophecy leader Christopher Daniels lost the U.K.-based Frontier Wrestling Alliance championship to Doug Williams, who also became the top contender to the ROH title due to his victory.

IN OTHER NEWS

UPN renewed *Smackdown* in a multi-year deal ... Trish Stratus defeated Victoria for the WWE women's title at WrestleMania XIX ... Shawn Michaels beat Chris Jericho at the same pay-per-view ... The Rock attended the Academy Awards ... *Third Degree,* a pre-WrestleMania special on TNN, earned a rating of 0.7 ... WWE released *Byte This* host and behind-the-scenes executive Kevin Kelly in a cost-cutting measure ... Federal agents and local authorities sought to question ex-Future of Wrestling promoter Bobby Rogers for a range of legal issues, ranging from petty lawsuits to felonies ... Lex Luger failed to appear for a hearing on charges of driving with an expired tag and no proof of insurance, and his license was suspended as a result ... NWA-TNA negotiated for a house show tour throughout Tennessee and Arkansas, in addition to eastern Canada and the U.S. East Coast ... Vince Russo announced he would be reducing his time as an on-air performer with TNA in order to spend more time with his family ... The Disciples of Synn attacked the APA at an OVW TV taping after Bradshaw remarked there wasn't "enough Jim Beam in Kentucky" to make Synn look good ... Doug Delicious upset Buff Bagwell at an MCW show in Glen Burnie, Maryland ... MCW champion Danny Doring defeated Romeo Valentino at the same event ... CZW returned to Viking Hall after XPW lost its exclusive lease ... Police arrested a fan for flashing a gun at Sean Stylez, who was insulting the crowd during a New Era Pro Wrestling show in Cleveland ... Slyk Wagner Brown and April Hunter beat Dylan Kage and Talia in a mixed tag team match at an MWF event in Lynn, Massachusetts ... Pacific Northwest indy wrestler Brian Cox was found dead in his apartment ... Japanese star Kodo Fuyuki died of cancer.



Shawn Michaels slingshots Chris Jericho
WrestleMania XIX, March 30, 2003
Photo by Joe Zanolle

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH
WRESTLEMANIA XIX'S HIGHS AND LOWS

Besides Limp Bizkit, there were no real outside celebrities to steal the spotlight, but it could be argued that this year's WrestleMania had the most star power in history. Nearly all of the most significant WWE superstars of the past two decades—including The Rock, Steve Austin, Triple-H, Kurt Angle, Brock Lesnar, The Undertaker, Shawn Michaels, and Hulk Hogan—wrestled on the pay-per-view. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bob Costas had hyped the Hogan-Vince McMahon streetfight in pretaped messages in the weeks leading to 'Mania.

The live event at Safeco Field in Seattle was a success by any measure. WWE's initial offering of 40,000 tickets sold for $2.3-million during the first weekend of sales. Ringside seats were $500 each. On March 30, WrestleMania XIX broke the stadium record by attracting 54,097 spectators from around the world. The live gate was $2.76-million.

Another WM "W" for UT!

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: THE UNDERTAKER

"Big Evil" entered WrestleMania XIX with a few handicaps: a bad left elbow, cartilage problems, bone chips, bone spurs, worn-out hips, and tag team partner Nathan Jones. After The Full-Blooded Italians injured Jones in an attack during the *Sunday Night Heat* pre-'Mania show, The Undertaker also found himself in a genuine handicap match—outnumbered two-to-one against The Big Show and A-Train during the pay-per-view.

Yet that didn't prevent the 14-year veteran from walking on the top rope and leaping more than seven feet to execute a leapfrog. The Undertaker's heroic performance was in stark contrast to the lumbering offense of both Big Show and A-Train, who spent the final minutes boring the crowd with a series of—*yawn!*—abdominal stretches.

Jones finally arrived on the scene, attacking Big Show on the arena floor and A-Train inside the ring. The Undertaker capitalized on the distraction by planting A-Train with a tombstone piledriver to score the pinfall at 9:53.

The 41-year-old Undertaker faced an even greater challenge after WrestleMania. He awaited an arthroscopic procedure that would sideline him for at least three weeks. His left elbow, which he had been unable to straighten in the weeks leading to WrestleMania, would require either surgery or intensive rehabilitation. But his doctors had good news about his hips: They wouldn't need to be replaced until his retirement.

Oh, and did we mention that Undertaker extended his WrestleMania undefeated streak to 11-0? That made "The Dead Man" arguably the most successful wrestler in the history of the event.

We saw a whole lotta Lolli!

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH
LOLLIPOP REVEALS THE "T" IN TNA

Hooray for Holly Wood! That's what plenty of male fans were thinking when Lollipop and Holly Wood became involved in a titillating catfight on NWA-TNA's March 12 pay-per-view.

It all started when Glenn Gilberti, formerly known as Disco Inferno, and Holly Wood made an open challenge to the women of TNA. To everyone's surprise, Lollipop, who was usually seen behind the bars of TNA's dancing cage, responded to Holly's challenge. In no time, Holly and Lollipop were squirming on the mat in a no-holds-barred catfight. Lollipop's right breast was exposed momentarily, but Holly showed no mercy. She ripped off the rest of Lollipop's top.

In full northern exposure, Lollipop kept on fighting Holly, seemingly oblivious to the bellowed hoots of delight in the Fairgrounds Coliseum. Jeremy Borash took his time in covering Lollipop's chest with his jacket. Of course, many believed it was only a matter of time before such an incident would occur.

Coincidentally, WWE was also involved in a bare-breasted venture within the same week when it produced a Girls Gone Wild pay-per-view, emanating from South Padre Island, Texas, in partnership with Joe Francis and Eric Bischoff. Francis, Torrie Wilson, Test, and Snoop Dogg were among the judges on the show. Although several women exposed their cleavage, none of the WWE divas—including Torrie, Nidia, and Stacy Keibler—pulled a Lollipop.

The three-day Fan Axxess—which sold memorabilia and merchandise, held autograph signings, and displayed interactive exhibits—drew more than 10,000 people. Wrestlers raised more than $37,000 for the American Diabetes Association by posing for photographs with fans. The corporate sponsorship of 1-800-Call-ATT and Snickers Cruncher also generated revenue at the Axxess event.

PPV buy rates were a different story. While WWE had reached nearly one million buys during peak years, the reported number for WrestleMania XIX was a disappointing 550,000.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"I carried ECW on my back for four years. How many pints of blood did I shed there? I've won titles in both WCW and WWE during the height of the ratings war. I've proven myself. I didn't need [Vince] Russo to open any doors for me. I open my own doors."

—Raven, denying that he would need Russo's SEX faction to beat NWA champion Jeff Jarrett, "Press Conference," *PWI,* August 2003

"In the early days, I drove all the way to North Carolina and they gave me a case of Coke as a payoff … My father often took me to wrestling shows, including WrestleMania I on closed-circuit TV. So it didn't surprise him that I became a pro wrestler. My dad died recently, and I wish he'd been able to see me beat Buff [Bagwell] in front of more than 1,000 people."

—Doug Delicious, commenting on his upset win over Buff Bagwell at a Maryland Championship Wrestling event, "Win, Lose, Or Draw," *PWI,* August 2003

"Citizen Rock is a great wrestler, but The Scorpion King is a lousy superhero. I mean, what superpowers does he have? None that I have witnessed. He can turn into a giant scorpion, but he still lost a fight against the very same guy who played George of the Jungle and Dudley Do-Right! *Whatsupwiddat?!*"

—The Hurricane, reflecting upon his pinfall win over The Rock on *Raw,* "Hotseat," *Inside Wrestling,* August 2003

"[Kurt Angle] has been dealing with this pain for quite a while. It has gotten slightly worse, but I think if he gets enough rest, he can deal with [competing at WrestleMania]. We all

MATCH OF THE MONTH
THE ROCK vs. STEVE AUSTIN

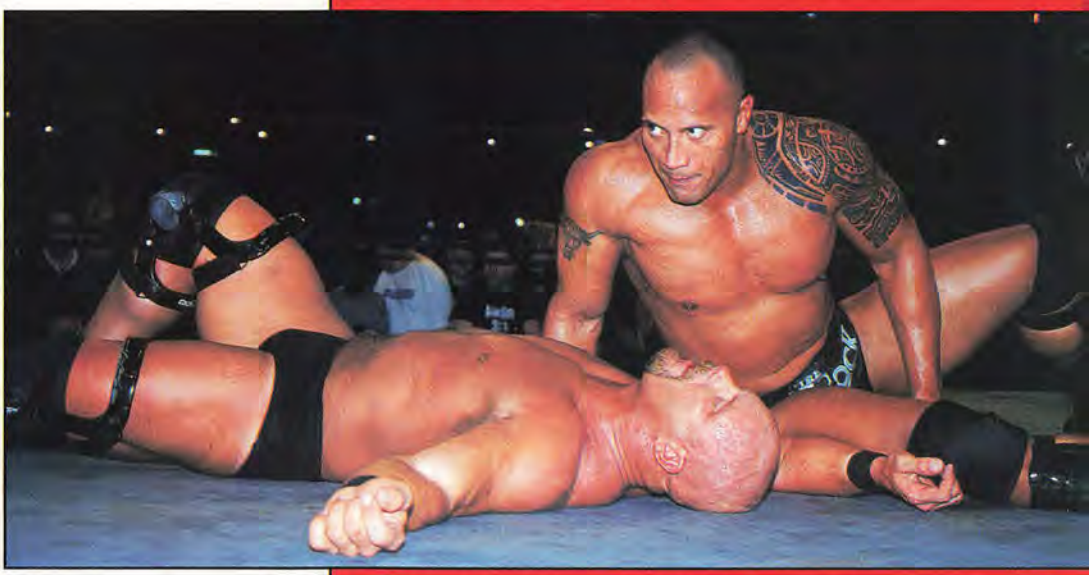
If Hollywood prevents The Rock from competing at another WrestleMania, or injuries prevent Steve Austin from ever donning the black trunks and black boots again for WWE's premier event, both men can be very proud of their match at 'Mania XIX. And, if this was the final Rock-Austin showdown, which is likely, then it was a classy and fitting end to their six-year rivalry.

Nearly all the fans at Safeco Field were solidly behind Austin. Not only did they miss him after his eight-month hiatus, but they also wanted his comeback to be a success. That momentum was apparent at the start of the bout, as Austin attacked Rock with reckless abandon and attempted the stunner in the very first minute. The Rock escaped to the arena floor, where Austin threw him into the ringpost.

Back in the ring, The Rock donned "Stone-Cold's" vest and clipped Austin's knee to begin a seesaw struggle that was reminiscent of their countless battles over the years. Austin used the Lou Thesz press, the stunner, and even the Rock bottom. "The Great One" would have the final say, however, as he unleashed the people's elbow and three consecutive Rock bottoms. The 54,097 fans were stunned as The Rock earned his first clean pinfall over Austin at 18:01, and his first WrestleMania win over "Stone-Cold" in three tries. Austin's comeback came to a dead stop.

While The Rock's victory was puzzling at first, considering that he was only a part-time wrestler, Austin's loss seemed more logical the following night when Raw General Manager Eric Bischoff announced that "Stone-Cold" no longer had medical clearance to wrestle. In light of that, Austin turned in a fabulous performance at WrestleMania XIX.

Fitting end to Rock-Austin rivalry



understand the risks, but he wrestled at the World Championships with a broken neck ... That's the difference between someone who is a true champion, someone who really loves this sport, and someone who just does it for the income."

—David Hawk, Kurt Angle's manager and personal trainer, commending his client for his willingness to withstand painful adversity, Slam Wrestling Canada

"In South Africa, we just did one little thing when Bill DeMott came out, kicked me in the stomach, and tried to take my brace off. I didn't feel like I had my arm. And I dropped to my knees and just went, 'Whoa, what's going on here?'"

—Edge, describing a scary incident that occurred before his spinal surgery, wwe.com

"A grain of truth turns into a mountain of fact. The people who write the Internet have nothing better to do than create rumors and build on rumors. It's all b.s. Ric's a great guy and a great friend and a consummate professional."

—Eric Bischoff, downplaying reports that Ric Flair attacked him backstage because of unresolved WCW issues, WrestleMania XIX press conference

"I started to resent [WWE's writers] so much. A lot of it probably isn't justified. I just got so frustrated that I would look at them and think, *You [expletives]. You sit in your room ... you have everybody's career in your hands and you don't even care* ... And just feeling like, *What in the hell do you know about this business? What the hell do you know about what I've done in this business?* It started to eat me up."

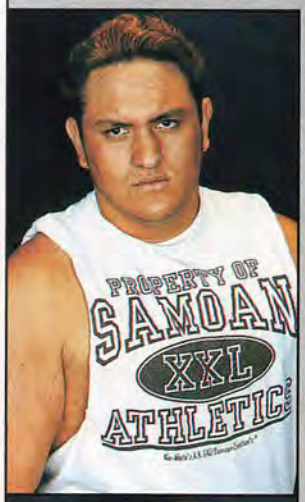
—Justin Credible, conveying his frustration with WWE's creative process, *Pro Wrestling Torch*

"I had to drive straight through without sleeping. I had to make myself vomit to stay awake."

—Spanky, telling how he avoided dozing off while driving across the country, wwe.com

"It's very hard when you give your best effort and it wasn't good enough. That's an even bigger pill to swallow. Your ego is bruised to be let go, especially when you consider that you're not one of the chosen players anymore ... Somebody recently coined me the hottest free agent in the business. That's a good feeling, too. I'm getting calls all the time and it's been very good for my ego."

—D-Lo Brown, explaining how he felt after his release from WWE, wrestlingobserver.com



WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Bill Goldberg: Kept his nickname of "Million-Dollar Bill"
Kurt Angle: Walked out of 'Mania under his own power
Kenta Kobashi: Ended rivalry with Misawa on high note
Samoa Joe: A champion of honor
The Undertaker: Still the biggest dog in the yard

LOSERS

Booker T: WWE didn't think he was worthy
Kevin Kelly: Hermie lost his job
Bobby Rogers: Buddy would be ashamed
Nathan Jones: Couldn't take *Heat,* let alone 'Mania
Lex Luger: His troubles were only beginning

"I'm 41 years old and I look at a guy like Curt Hennig. I don't want to not be here tomorrow and have lost all my time with my kids. This is not an angle. This is me doing the right thing, stepping up to the plate, and living up to my role as a father."

—Vince Russo, announcing that he was going to straighten out his priorities, Total Nonstop Action

"He's got no personality. He needs a personality transplant."

—Konnan, giving his opinion on David Young while doing color commentary, Total Nonstop Action

"My neck sucks, Eric Bischoff fired me, my neck sucks."

—Steve Austin, reacting to Bischoff ending his career as an active competitor, *Raw*

"While I was in the Heartland Wrestling Association, I was more excited about going to OVW. Not only do I have Les Thatcher's training, but now I have Jim Cornette and Danny Davis' as well. OVW is a great place to train and it's like a little family."

—Nikita, praising WWE's developmental territory, "12 Questions," *PWI*, August 2003

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Killer Brooks, Larry Zbyszko, & Buzz Sawyer:
DID RIC FLAIR ORDER THIS HIT SQUAD TO ATTACK TONY ATLAS?
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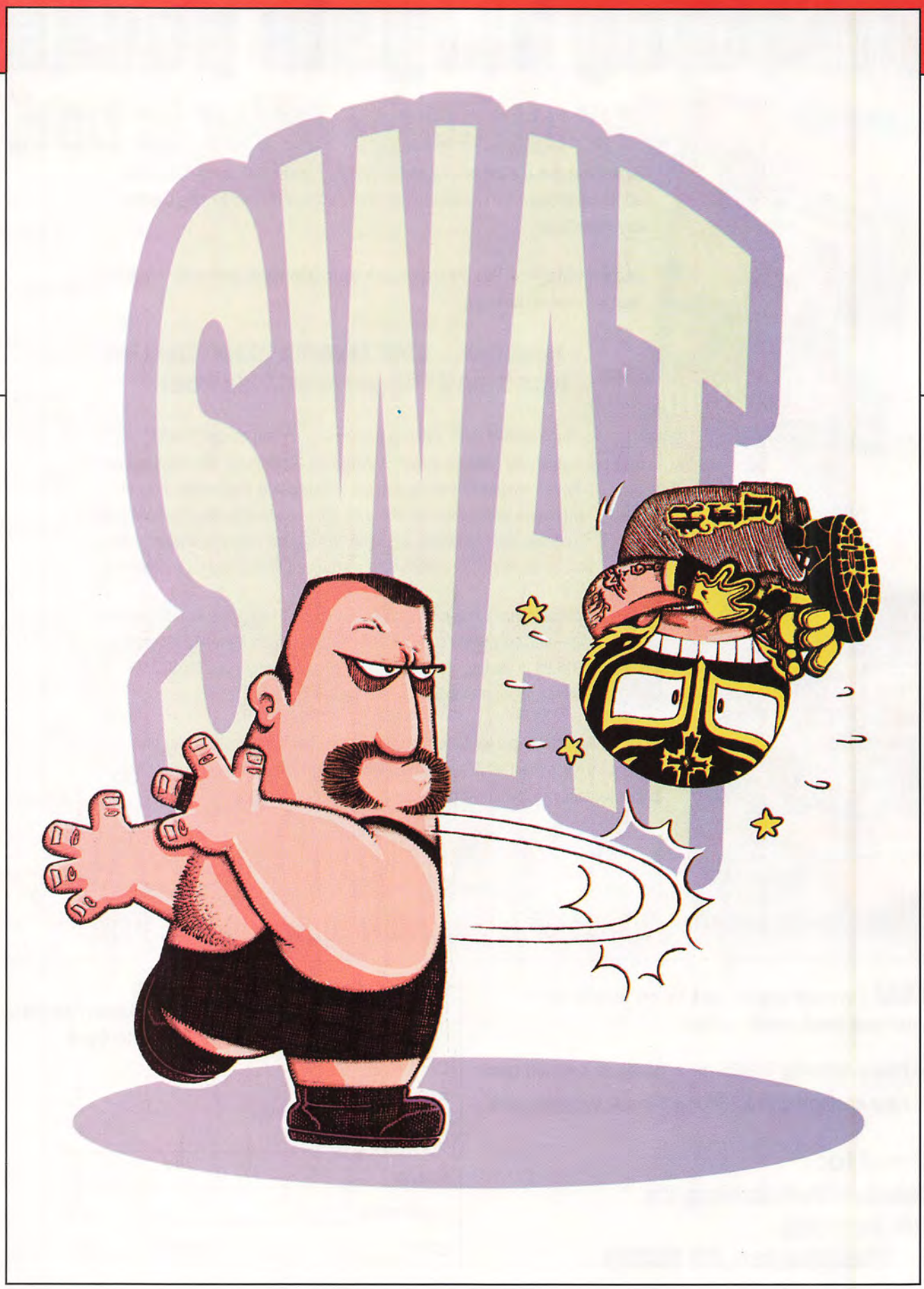

SWAT

april

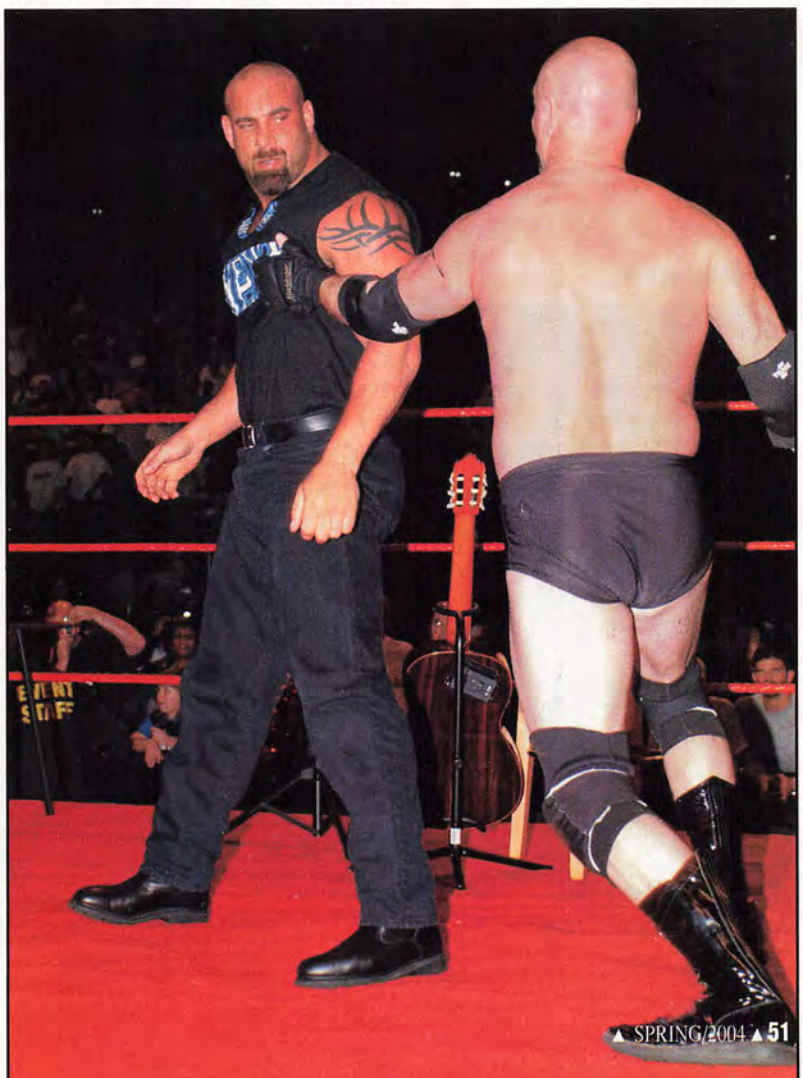
THIS WAS A month of professional choices and personal consequences. Bill Goldberg was the new employee of a company he once claimed not to respect. The consequence? He seemed to be miserable at his new job, failing to blend in with the Raw locker room and getting a lackluster reception at Backlash. Kurt Angle underwent nontraditional surgery to save his WWE career. Or was he simply risking more severe neck problems in the future? Sable and Roddy Piper returned to WWE, losing some of their personal respect in the process. Torrie Wilson showed it all in *Playboy.* But was this truly an event to celebrate?

Away from WWE, Jeff Hardy adjusted to his new, more private life in North Carolina. Was he really choosing art and rock 'n' roll over wrestling? Or was he covering for something else? NWA champion Jeff Jarrett overcame the interference of 13 men to retain his title against Raven. Did that make him a dragon slayer … or was it just overkill? Lex Luger had trouble coping with life away from the spotlight, evidenced by a domestic disturbance involving Elizabeth and a drunk driving arrest.

But there was plenty of uplift in the month of April. Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar and John Cena proved they could carry the main event mantle for WWE, and Super 8 competitors Paul London and Chance Beckett showed how great wrestling could be at its purest. Wrestling proved that life is never easy, but it can be quite good.

BILL GOLDBERG'S IMPACT ON WWE DRAWS MIXED REVIEWS

Most WWE fans knew something was wrong when they spotted Bill Goldberg wearing Goldust's wig during a backstage



Goldberg eyes up Gillberg on *Raw*

"Specialists believed vertebrae fusion surgery might not simply postpone Angle's career, but that it could end it."

vignette on *Raw*. While that was Creative's attempt to show a kinder, gentler side to Goldberg, it did nothing but take away from the no-nonsense mystique that made him a superstar in the first place. That incident, along with an embarrassing backstage altercation with Chris Jericho and a poor reception at Backlash, forced WWE to rethink its handling of "Da Man."

Only one week after his *Raw* debut, Goldberg was overheard making negative comments about Chris Jericho's size and his supposed inability to become a full-fledged main-eventer. That prompted a physical confrontation between Jericho and Goldberg, resulting in Jericho taking down Goldberg with a front facelock before wrestlers and agents separated them.

Backstage controversy gave way to box office disappointment at Backlash when the Goldberg-Rock main event drew lower numbers than expected. There, chants of "Goldberg sucks!" replaced those of "Rocky sucks!" The Rock received more cheers than Goldberg, despite the fact that he ran from "Da Man" for most of the match and was headed for Hollywood. Again, many critics blamed WWE Creative. In the weeks leading to the pay-per-view, Goldberg was depicted as a dumb jock who often fell prey to The Rock's clever capers.

By the end of April, the question had to be asked: Was WWE still committed to Goldberg? Or, more importantly, was Goldberg still committed to WWE?

Dr. Hae-Dong Jho

KURT ANGLE UNDERGOES CAREER-SAVING SPINAL SURGERY

Throughout March, Kurt Angle and WWE officials began considering the sad possibility that nagging neck and spinal cord injuries would force the Olympian's early retirement—just as he had begun tapping into his true greatness. By April, it seemed as if an innovative surgery might prolong Angle's career by another five to 10 years.

More than a half-dozen WWE superstars had undergone traditional vertebrae fusion surgery over the past few years, usually under the direction of Dr. Lloyd Youngblood of San Antonio. That typically sidelined wrestlers for a year. Specialists believed vertebrae fusion surgery might not simply postpone Angle's career, but that it could end it.

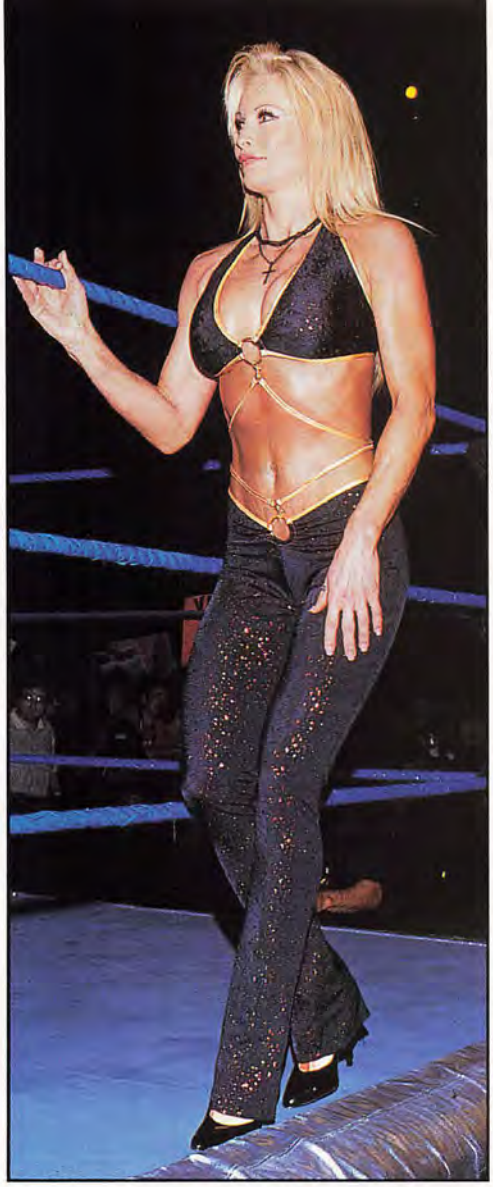
Dr. Hae-Dong Jho, who specializes in "minimally invasive spine and brain surgery," read about Angle's plight in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.* Instead of removing the total disks and fusing parts of Angle's hipbone into the adjoining ones, Dr. Jho would remove the portion of the disks pressing against his spinal cord and reconstruct the two vertebrae. Recovery would take only six weeks instead of the traditional nine months—and, in Angle's case, retirement would no longer be a concern.

"The doctor is so excited and so confident, it almost scares me," Angle told wwe.com. He also consulted Scott Hall, who had undergone the same surgery with Dr. Jho.

Angle underwent surgery on April 4 and would return to Smackdown shows in early-June. The broken neck he suffered prior to the 1996 Olympics, absorbing high-impact moves on a nightly basis in WWE, and ramming his left shoulder into a turnbuckle at No Way Out had all contributed to Angle's condition.

SABLE MAKES SURPRISE RETURN TO WWE

Would Sable participate in a lesbian storyline? Was she really back in Vince McMahon's good graces? Did her husband, Marc Mero, approve of all this? Would she "accidentally" lose her top on television? Had she abandoned her religious values?



Sable forgave and forgot

Fans were asking all of those questions when Sable unexpectedly appeared on *Smackdown* in April. The answer to the first question seemed to be "yes" when she gave Torrie Wilson, who had just posed for *Playboy,* a quick kiss in her very first appearance and engaged in suggestive touching over the next few weeks. But Sable's bizarre flirtations hid her real agenda: to dispose of Torrie and reclaim her spot as WWE's top female star.

Was McMahon happy to see Sable again? Well, Vince seemed glad to have her back while he was steaming up the cameras with their televised makeout sessions. He also appointed Sable as the assistant to his daughter, Smackdown GM Stephanie McMahon.

Was Marc Mero pleased by Sable's antics? Probably not. But, as it turned out, the Meros had separated before Sable returned to WWE. So far, Sable has not revealed her breasts on television ... but pay-per-view didn't seem to be out of the question.

And her values? That remained up for debate. Of course, Rena Mero would assert that she hadn't betrayed her values. Mero had testified against WWE in the Nicole Bass sexual harassment lawsuit as late as 2002. That followed Mero's own $110-million suit against WWE over similar issues. WWE paid Mero an undisclosed sum in 1999.

In 2003, it seemed as if Rena Mero would be the one paying.

"She gave Torrie Wilson, who had just posed for *Playboy,* a quick kiss in her very first appearance and engaged in suggestive touching over the next few weeks."

"PIPER'S PIT" DEBUTS ON *SMACKDOWN*

More than 15 years had passed since Roddy Piper had attacked guests such as Rick McGraw and Frankie Williams, both verbally and physically, on "Piper's Pit," a four-minute interview segment that premiered on *WWF Championship Wrestling* in 1984. In April, it seemed as if the legend of "Piper's Pit" had preceded ol' R.P. when he revived the segment on *Smackdown.*

Piper had returned to WWE after a seven-year absence at WrestleMania XIX. Disguised in a trench coat, "Hot Rod" jumped into the middle of the Hulk Hogan-Vince McMahon streetfight, grabbed a steel pipe, teased a swing at McMahon, but nailed Hogan instead. When Hogan rallied to beat McMahon anyway, it seemed as if Piper's work was left undone.

McMahon was the first guest on the new "Piper's Pit." The two wrestling veterans engaged in a war of words, with McMahon ridiculing

Piper was back in the "Pit"

"Early indications were that Wilson's cover would contend with Chyna's in overall sales."

Piper's newly accumulated paunch and accusing him of "sucking a bratwurst" all day. Piper had a few verbal putdowns for McMahon, but they finally arrived at common ground: their hatred for "Hulkamania."

Piper encountered more enemies than Hogan, though. Later in the same segment, Rikishi approached Piper with a coconut, seeking retribution for the Scotsman's attack of Jimmy Snuka nearly 20 years earlier. Before Rikishi could avenge his cousin, Sean O'Haire jumped into the ring and held him from behind while Piper continued the tradition by smashing *him* with the coconut.

TORRIE WILSON BECOMES LATEST WWE DIVA TO POSE FOR *PLAYBOY*

When the May 2003 issue of *Playboy* hit newsstands this month, Hugh Heffner and his staff were expecting higher sales than usual. Why? It was because *Playboy* had experienced incredible sales with two other WWE divas, Sable and Chyna (Joanie Laurer).

Torrie bared it all

But could *Playboy* ask for better promotion than having its on-sale date incorporated into WWE storylines? After the photo session concluded, Wilson received more airtime on *Smackdown* and began feuding with the returning Sable, who had graced the April 1999 issue. That issue was the best-selling *Playboy* in more than five years. The November 2000 issue, featuring Chyna, sold even more copies. Both Sable and Chyna did follow-up spreads under their real names and sales were brisk, but not quite as high as before.

"There was some concern when we started talking about doing another WWE wrestler," *Playboy* Photo Editor Gary Cole told *The Wrestler*. "We thought maybe pro wrestling isn't as popular in 2003 as it was in 2000." However, early indications were that Wilson's cover would contend with Chyna's in overall sales.

"WWE is never short of storylines—or beautiful women," noted Cole. "As long as that holds true, there's always an opportunity for us to work together."

PAUL LONDON WINS 2003 SUPER 8 TOURNAMENT

For the seventh year, the East Coast Wrestling Association invited a handful of North America's top cruiserweights to St. Matthew's Parish Hall just outside Wilmington, Delaware, for the highlight of the indy calendar: the Super 8 Tournament. Promoter Jim Kettner was beaming with pride as WWE's Charlie Haas, who once held the ECWA tag team title with brother Russ, introduced the field of eight: Paul London, Chance Beckett, Frankie Kazarian, Brian Kendrick (Spanky), Alex Arion, Sedrick Strong, Chris Cage, and Chris Sabin.

Frankie Kazarian slapped Chris Sabin to begin the first opening-round bout, which also happened to be a battle of "The Futures," a rivalry that would continue in NWA-TNA. Kazarian won with a flatliner. Brian Kendrick avenged his 2001 opening-round loss with a victory over rising OVW star Chris Cage. Chance Beckett used an Asai moonsault into a scorpion deathdrop to defeat Sedrick Strong, but "Mr. Showtime" suffered a deep gash on his chin that would hinder him for the rest of the night. Paul London, still recovering from nasal infection surgery, used a quick rollup to pin Alex Arion.

In the semifinals, London turned Kazarian's attempted huracanrana into a power bomb, and used a breathtaking shooting star press to secure the win. Beckett, with a bloody bandage hanging from his chin, pinned Kendrick for the upset victory.

That left an interesting final match: London, an established fan favorite in the Northeast, vs. Beckett, a cocky virtual unknown who had earned respect among the diehard crowd. Although Beckett's

cloverleaf variation had London screaming in agony, the Western Canadian star fell prey to London's torture device submission hold. The Super 8 victory helped London earn a WWE contract later in the year.

SMACKDOWN CHAMP BROCK LESNAR BEATS JOHN CENA AT BACKLASH

Fans witnessed the future of wrestling when WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar defended against John Cena at Backlash, held in Worcester, Massachusetts. While competing for a world title on pay-per-view would seem like the pinnacle of most careers, long-time WWE watchers agreed that the Lesnar-Cena match at Backlash was only the beginning, akin to the Steve Austin-Rocky Maivia Intercontinental title matches of five years earlier.

These two men, who were toiling in the obscurity of Ohio Valley only two years prior, sensed the importance of the event. Both men received a mix of cheers and boos because, although Lesnar was an established fan favorite, Cena was performing in front of a hometown crowd. After his prematch rap, Cena went after Lesnar at the opening bell.

Lesnar manhandled Cena for most of the match, but Cena surprised everyone by hanging with the Smackdown champion past the 10-minute mark and eventually neutralizing him on the mat. Lesnar escaped that predicament, absorbed a back elbow, and rocked Cena with two vicious clotheslines and a powerslam. Even that barrage failed to put away the homeboy. Lesnar speared Cena into the turnbuckles and knocked him down twice with shoulderblocks.

At the 13-minute mark, Cena gave Lesnar a low blow and rolled up the champion for a cheap pin attempt. Despite Cena's attempted use of a chain, however, Lesnar caught the rapper with the F5 to win the match. But there was little doubt that these two rising stars would meet again.

2003 Super 8 winner London and Beckett share a moment

JEFF JARRETT BEATS RAVEN TO RETAIN NWA TITLE

NWA-TNA officials weren't in the habit of hyping some of their weekly pay-per-views over the others, but they made an exception in the case of NWA champion Jeff Jarrett's title defense against Raven on April 30 at Nashville's Fairgrounds Coliseum. There was little doubt that a match pitting two veterans in their prime, one trying to elevate the prestige of his championship and the other a recently banished WWE superstar, would be a classic.

But it resembled a high-traffic area during the evening rush hour. Although Raven was keeping pace with Jarrett on a hold-for-hold basis, his Gathering group-

"The Super 8 victory helped London earn a WWE contract later in the year."

Raven bloodied, but couldn't beat Jarrett

ies—Julio Dinero and Alexis Laree—constantly interfered. Raven survived the stroke. Jarrett survived the evenflow DDT. Soon enough, the two warriors were battered and bloody.

Jarrett laid Raven across a table on the arena floor. Then the NWA champion went extreme on the former ECW icon, climbing to the top turnbuckle and letting loose with a flying elbowsmash that sent Raven splintering through the table. Jarrett dragged Raven inside the ring for the cover, but Dinero and Laree interfered again, prompting referee Rudy Charles to finally order them to the backstage area.

That's when everything went insane. Members of Vince Russo's SEX faction attacked Jarrett. Members of James Mitchell's New Church attacked SEX. Members of the Extreme Revolution faction handcuffed Jarrett and gave him a devastating con-*chair*-to. The lights went out. Sabu attacked the Extreme Revolution. Finally, NWA official Bill Behrens freed Jarrett from his handcuffs, and Raven spiked the champion with yet another DDT.

After the interference of 13 people, Jarrett came back with the stroke to pin Raven. "I defend this title as if it's my life," he said in the dressing room prior to being examined by the doctor. And no one could dispute that.

WWE RELEASES JEFF HARDY

This announcement was posted on WWE's Web site on April 22: "WWE.com regrets to inform its fans that WWE has severed its relationship with Jeff Hardy effective today. We wish Jeff the best of luck."

Those who knew Jeff Hardy saw this coming for quite a while. The 25-year-old daredevil was often late for live events, was putting forth less effort in the ring, and had publicly stated that he would rather be a rock star than a pro wrestler. In fact, the former WWE World tag team, Intercontinental, European, and hardcore champ

Hardy seemed to welcome his release

"I defend this title as if it's my life."

Chief Morley suplexes Maven
***Raw*, April 21, 2003**
Photo by Scott Cunningham

"She declined to press charges, but that didn't prevent the officers from arresting Luger for misdemeanor battery. He was later released on a bond of $2,500."

was spending more and more time on his artwork and his band, Peroxwhygen.

Hardy's release prompted rumors of "personal demons," but others were willing to take him at his word, that he had simply lost his passion for the business. In a radio interview, WWE agent Tom Prichard stressed that the split was amicable and Hardy might return in the near future.

"It was no secret that Jeff was going through some tough times," noted WWE analyst Thomas Pilliard. "He was pretty confused, because wrestling wasn't completely fulfilling him anymore, which led him to try his hand at other things—and that in turn started to hurt his in-ring career. He still had some nice matches, but he was sloppy and sluggish at times, and he didn't seem to have that fire inside him that he had a few years ago ... So I can't say I was surprised to find out that he and WWE parted ways."

Hardy didn't rule out a few one-shot deals on the independent circuit, however.

Luger: legal trouble

LEX LUGER ARRESTED FOR BATTERING ELIZABETH

A domestic disturbance emanating from Lex Luger's townhome in Cobb County, Georgia, interrupted a quiet Easter Sunday. Police arrived on the scene and found that Luger's longtime girlfriend, Elizabeth Hulette (known to wrestling fans as Miss Elizabeth), had suffered a bruise above and a cut below her left eye, a swollen right eye, a bump on her head, and a busted lip.

According to the police report, Elizabeth said their dog had caused the marks by playing too roughly before admitting Luger (whose real name is Lawrence Pfohl) was really the one to blame. She declined to press charges, but that didn't prevent the officers from arresting Luger for misdemeanor battery. He was later released on a bond of $2,500.

Only two days later, on April 21, Luger ran his Porsche into another car. The 44-year-old star was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol.

Acquaintances had become more concerned over Luger and Elizabeth in recent months. During a World Wrestling All-Stars tour of Europe in December 2002, friends noted the former WCW World champion had gained considerable weight and his cardiovascular conditioning was poor in the ring. He suffered several sweating spells that led to him catching pneumonia and spending much of his time in hotel rooms while on tour. Elizabeth, who had been expected to appear on the shows, also kept a low profile. Their visits to Luger's gym, the Main Event Fitness Club, had also become less frequent.

To many of their friends, Luger and Elizabeth seemed headed for a fall.

IN OTHER NEWS

Jazz pinned Trish Stratus for the WWE women's title at Backlash ... Also at the pay-per-view, Raw tag team champions Rob Van Dam and Kane defeated The Dudley Boyz, and Smackdown tag team champions Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas beat Los Guerreros ... WWE CEO Linda McMahon appointed Steve Austin the new co-general manager of Raw, sharing power equally with Eric Bischoff ... Triple-H and Stephanie McMahon of WWE, and Jeff Jarrett and Glenn Gilberti of NWA-TNA, among others, attended the Cable Television Association of Marketers convention in New Orleans ... Shawn Donovan defeated Erik Andretti for the IWF American title in West Paterson, New Jersey ... Doug Basham beat Nick Dinsmore for the Ohio Valley belt ... Federal authorities raided the offices of Xtreme Associates, the parent company of XPW, in connection with allegations that underage models had been used in its pornographic videos.

Chance Beckett locks up Spanky
ECWA Super 8 Tournament, April 5, 2003
Photo by Joe Zanolle

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH: WWE BEATS THE WWF

World Wrestling Entertainment's victory over the World Wide Fund For Nature in an English Court of Appeals gave new hope that WWE could market vintage videotapes and merchandise without violating the law. Just before the 2002 Christmas shopping season, a High Court of Justice had granted the Fund's request to block the sale of classic THQ/Jakks video games. The Fund claimed the merchandise contained WWE's old "WWF" scratch logo, which had been determined to be a trademark infringement.

On April 7, the Court of Appeals judge ruled that the old "WWF" logo, in the context of a vintage video game, did not infringe upon the Fund's use of the acronym. The judge also held the Fund liable for legal expenses that WWE and THQ/Jakks incurred in this particular case. That sum was estimated to be more than $100,000.

WWE had been going to great lengths to eradicate the scratch logo and all other "WWF" references, blurring out the letters in classic footage and airing reruns of *WCW Worldwide*—which it had been included in its deal with AOL Time Warner in 2001—in time slots reserved for vintage WWF programs on European satellite television. While this case didn't specifically address those issues, it did set a precedent for the time when WWE tries to make full use of its video library.

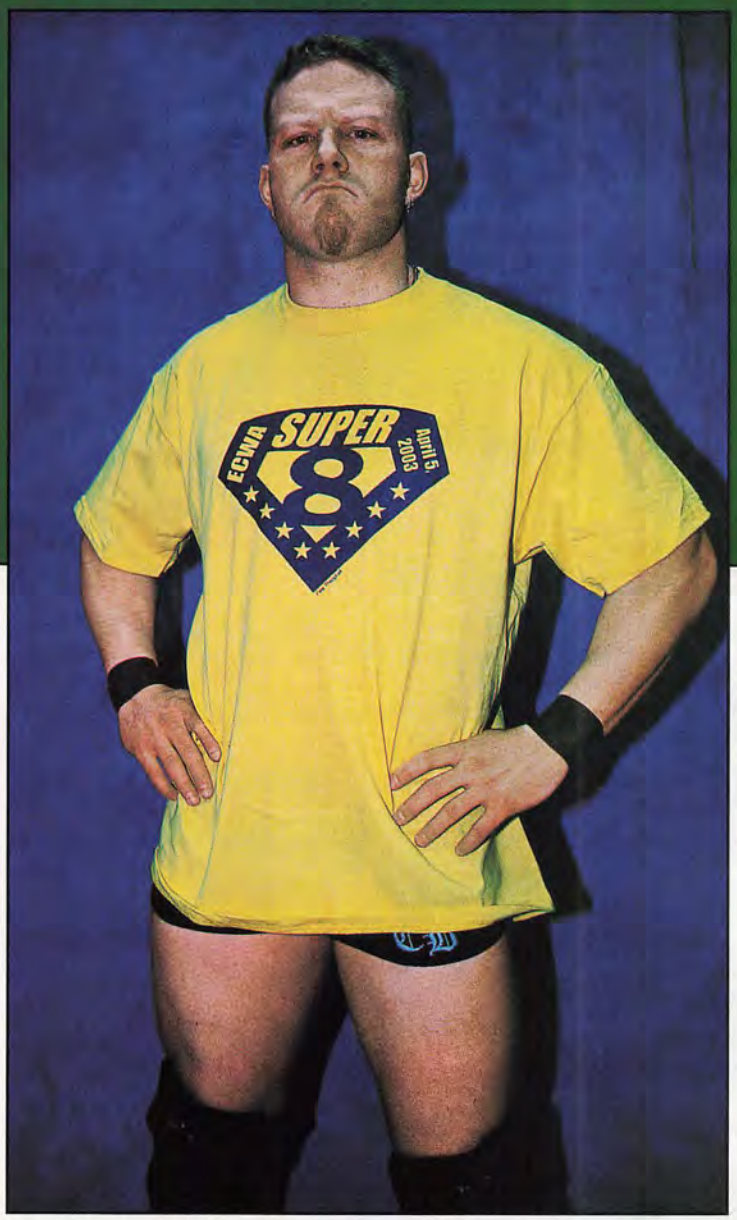
Said WWE CEO Linda McMahon: "We have never done a thing to damage [the Fund], but they have done nothing but try to damage us."

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH
CHANCE BECKETT

Any time a Calgary native locks up with someone out of Texas, expect an incredible match. Bret Hart and Shawn Michaels proved that to be the case, and fans should have expected a classic when Chance Beckett, who trained at the Hart Dungeon, faced Paul London, a protege of former Shawn Michaels Wrestling Academy trainer Rudy Boy Gonzales, in the final of the 2003 Super 8 Tournament.

Then again, few fans at St. Matthew's Parish Hall in Delaware had ever heard of Beckett—and they're considered to be among the most knowledgeable diehards in all of wrestling. They didn't realize Beckett had spent most of his career in NWA Extreme Canadian Championship Wrestling, based in British Columbia. They didn't realize he had held the heavyweight, tag team, and junior heavyweight titles there, in addition to the Canadian junior heavyweight strap. They didn't realize he had survived intense rivalries with Scotty Mac, Adam Firestorm, Tony Kozina, and former ECWA regular American Dragon. They didn't realize "Mr. Showtime" was more than a cocky nickname. It was a moniker he had earned by delivering countless exciting matches over a seven-year period.

But the ECWA crowd learned about Beckett very quickly on April 5. They saw his toughness in his opening-round win over Sedrick Strong, despite a bloody gash on his chin. They witnessed his tenacity in his upset victory over Brian Kendrick (Spanky). At the end of the night, they realized that his tournament final match against Paul London could have gone either way ... and Chance Beckett would have been a deserving winner.



Chance Beckett: winner in defeat

MATCH OF THE MONTH:
TRIPLE-H, RIC FLAIR, & CHRIS JERICHO vs. SHAWN MICHAELS, KEVIN NASH, & BOOKER T

Would Triple-H, Shawn Michaels, and Kevin Nash re-form The Kliq at Backlash? Although half of the six men in this match were former members of The Kliq, there were no reunions—just violence, long memories, and sledgehammers.

While Helmsley and Nash's refusal to lock up at the opening bell fueled rumors of a reunion, Jericho and Michaels tagged in to begin the heated encounter. Michaels caught Jericho in a waistlock and shoved his knee into the Canadian's abdomen. Jericho recovered and attempted a powerslam, but Michaels rolled him up for a near-fall instead. Michaels soon fell prey to the Walls of Jericho before making the tag to Nash.

"Big Daddy Cool" overwhelmed Jericho and tagged Booker T. Booker then used a spinebuster to floor Jericho, who had been in the ring far too long. Jericho finally made the tag to Triple-H. The WWE Raw champion led a three-on-one assault on Booker T in the corner. Booker escaped and tagged Michaels, while Triple-H tagged Flair.

Michaels gained the advantage over Flair as the other four men battled on the arena floor. "The Heartbreak Kid" was about to finish off Flair with the superkick when Jericho re-entered the ring and bulldogged him. Flair then snared Michaels in the figure-four leglock.

Nash let go of Triple-H, whom he was about to jackknife through the announcers' table, when he heard Michaels' screams. He ran back into the ring and jackknifed Jericho. That enabled Triple-H to smack Nash with his sledgehammer to secure the pinfall.

No, Nash wasn't in the mood for a reunion.

Booker gives "The Game" the boot

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH
GREAT SASUKE BECOMES A JAPANESE JESSE

Ordinarily, news of a wrestler being elected to political office would be worthy of praise, not WRESTLING ANNUAL's "Oddball Story Of The Month." While it's true that the Great Sasuke pulled off an impressive feat by winning a seat in Japan's national legislature, representing the Iwate prefecture located 290 miles of Tokyo, even he would have to admit that his electoral win sparked an oddball controversy.

The 33-year-old Sasuke, whose real name is Masanori Murakawa, had campaigned in his famed wrestling mask, usually a black and white model with scarlet streaks and golden wings by the eyeholes. That's one reason why he refused to take off his mask after the election—and conservative legislators, who had already criticized some colleagues for not wearing neckties, loudly protested his decision.

"There is no law specifically forbidding it," a fellow legislator told the *Nikkan Sports* newspaper. "But now that he has won, we must look into the issue."

The Michinoku Pro star asserted that it was a question of honor. "This is my face ... I won support from voters with this face, and to take it off would be breaking promises."

Sasuke hoped his "superabundant power," which he often bragged about prior to his matches, would be just as useful in politics as it had been in wrestling. It is believed that his mystique as wrestling's "North Eastern Hero" is what helped the former J-Crown champ win the election.

To unmask or not to unmask?

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"Chance Beckett really inspired me out there. In fact, he inspired me so much that I almost hated to take the victory away from him. That trophy really belongs to both of us and the other six guys in the Super 8."

—Paul London, referring to his tournament final opponent, "London Calling! Shawn Michaels' Protege Wins 2003 Super 8," *PWI,* August 2003

"In that entire time, I was only tag team champion on two occasions, and that was it! I was either a bad wrestler or smart promoter—you be the judge!"

—Jim Kettner, reflecting upon his 35 years in the ECWA, "Jim Kettner: The Man Behind The Super 8," *PWI,* August 2003

"That Nike commercial where the guy was streaking through the soccer stadium was huge at the time, and I thought that by doing something similar right in the middle of *Smackdown,* I could capitalize on that commercial's popularity. And if you ask me, it worked. The fans loved it. I think Steph enjoyed it, too."

—Brian "Spanky" Kendrick, explaining why he ran through an arena in the buff, "Q & A," *The Wrestler,* September 2003

"No, it just wasn't the same as pro wrestling. I wasn't able to wear fancy clothes, so I said to hell with this."

—Chris Cage, remembering why amateur wrestling was a disappointment, "Introducing," *The Wrestler,* September 2003

"I cannot sit through five minutes of that show without having my intelligence insulted. They desperately need to change."

—Vince Russo, stating why he didn't watch WrestleMania XIX, Chicago radio station WSCR

"All I know about the dude is that he has a great body, tremendous taste in clothes, and truckloads of charisma, brother."

—Hulk Hogan, protecting Mr. America's cover, media conference call

"It's moments like WrestleMania that make me put my neck and pretty face on the line."

—Brock Lesnar, explaining why he executed a shooting star press against his better judgment, Minnesota radio station KFAN

"This company can't strap a rocket on somebody who is not ready for it, no matter what. But a talent can strap a rocket to himself whether the office is ready to push himself or not, and get himself over. It doesn't work the other way around. There have been numerous examples in the past of guys who they've tried to go to the moon with. Sid (Vicious), Lex Luger, guys that they really tried to go with, and then it didn't work out."

—Triple-H, advising WWE's up-and-comers, wwe.com

"The biggest reason I walked away was because my health is going downhill so badly, I can't compete at an acceptable level, and at a risk factor that's high enough to me. Everything I do in the ring is very dangerous and makes me go even further downhill. It's potentially something where I could end up a quadriplegic."

—Steve Austin, discussing his reasons for walking out of WWE in June 2002, wwe.com

"Oh, you've been around a few months and all of a sudden you're going to throw around insider terminology!"

—Jeff Jarrett, snapping at Goldylocks' assertion that "some of the boys" had said the NWA champion had been acting strange as of late, Total Nonstop Action

WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Kurt Angle: Dr. Jho was no joke
Torrie Wilson: WWE's most divine diva
Paul London: Super win at the Super 8
Jeff Jarrett: Proved he had the stroke
Chance Beckett: Finally found a Band-Aid

LOSERS

Bill Goldberg: Shouldn't have worn that wig
Sable: The ultimate sellout
John Cena: Brock was no crock
Jeff Hardy: Perox*what*?
Lex Luger: The demons got personal

Kid Kash subdues The Amazing Red
NWA-TNA, April 30, 2003
Photo by Vern Verna

eep!

may

THE DEATH OF Elizabeth Hulette might be remembered as the saddest wrestling news of 2003. How could someone so nice and considerate take such a wrong turn? Did others take advantage of her? Or was she responsible for her own fate? Either way, a series of bad choices led to the premature demise of a pioneering beauty. Meanwhile, the fate of Lex Luger hung in the balance. Would he go to prison? Would he ever be able to escape the shadow of May 1? The answer to that second question is easy. Probably not.

Aside from that tragic story, a lot of people made news in May simply by opening their mouths. Bret Hart made his first high-profile appearance since suffering a debilitating stroke during a bicycle mishap in 2002. He had plenty to say about recent deaths in the wrestling industry, but maintained he was content with life outside the squared circle. Roddy Piper tried to rationalize his return to WWE, despite his countless criticisms of the company, but he would have been better off keeping his mouth shut. Jesse Ventura made headlines because MSNBC wouldn't let him talk.

But wrestling isn't about tragedy or talking—it's about action. That's what WWE delivered at Judgment Day, most notably with WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar's victory over The Big Show in a handicap bout, and Eddie Guerrero and Tajiri defeating Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas for the Smackdown tag team title in a ladder match. And, of course, TNA tried to keep its action, well, total nonstop.

MISS ELIZABETH DIES AT 42

Long-time manager Elizabeth Hulette was pronounced dead on arrival at Kennestone Hospital in Cobb County, Georgia, early in the morning of May 1. Known professionally as Miss Elizabeth, she had been living with her boyfriend, Lex Luger, at the time.

According to Luger, whose real name is Lawrence Pfohl, Elizabeth drank two glasses of vodka, took medication for back pain, sat on the couch, and began choking on food. Apparently, Luger tried frantically to take the food out of her mouth with some napkins, and even shook her to create an airway. He was not successful. She turned purplish and Luger called 911. She was unconscious when rescue personnel arrived on the scene.

R.I.P. Miss Elizabeth

"'She never walked around with her nose in the air thinking she was bigger than the wrestlers, even though for a time, she was!'"

In 1985, the Kentucky native debuted as the manager of her then-husband, Randy Savage, in the WWF. Elizabeth's on-air personality was that of an innocent prom queen, and she was at the center of storylines involving Savage, Hulk Hogan, George Steele, and several others. She made a comeback in WCW in the mid-1990s, often against her former wholesome image, as a valet for The Four Horsemen, the NWO, ex-husband Savage for a limited time, and eventually Luger. Elizabeth made her final WCW appearance in 1999.

Bret Hart, in his "Sharpshooter" column published in the *Calgary Sun,* echoed the sentiments of many: "She was always courteous and never, ever developed a trace of a prima donna attitude. She never walked around with her nose in the air thinking she was bigger than the wrestlers, even though for a time, she was!"

Several months later, it was revealed that a mix of alcohol, painkillers, nausea medication, and tranquilizers had likely caused her death. Her blood alcohol level was 0.29, more than three times the legal limit for driving in most states.

JEFF JARRETT DEFEATS STING TO UNIFY NWA AND WWA TITLES

WWA champion Sting was the overwhelming crowd favorite heading into his title unification bout against NWA champion Jeff Jarrett on May 25 in Auckland, New Zealand. It was the main event of World Wrestling All-Stars' latest pay-per-view offering, The Reckoning.

Speaking from the rafters of the North Shore Events Centre earlier in the show, Sting compared his black bat to New Zealand's national rugby team while comparing Jarrett's guitar to Australia's team. That's why Sting received a huge ovation when, 10 minutes into the match, he used his bat to shatter Jarrett's guitar.

Sting's luck went downhill from there. The referee got caught in the middle of a Stinger splash onto Jarrett, and after Sting used a scorpion deathdrop to set up an obvious three-count, the official was still incapacitated. Sting's long-time buddy Rick Steiner intercepted Joe E. Legend, who was about to interfere on Jarrett's behalf, with a clothesline over the top rope. Then Sting clamped the scorpion deathlock onto Jarrett.

But the surprise of the night occurred when Steiner, a former co-holder of the UWF tag team title with Sting, smashed his ex-partner with the remains of Jarrett's guitar. The referee recovered just as a groggy Jarrett made the successful cover ... and officially unified the NWA and WWA championships.

As a result, the WWA belt was eliminated and the NWA heavyweight title was recognized as the top championship in both promotions. WWA postponed its plans for another tour indefinitely.

Jarrett stung Sting in New Zealand

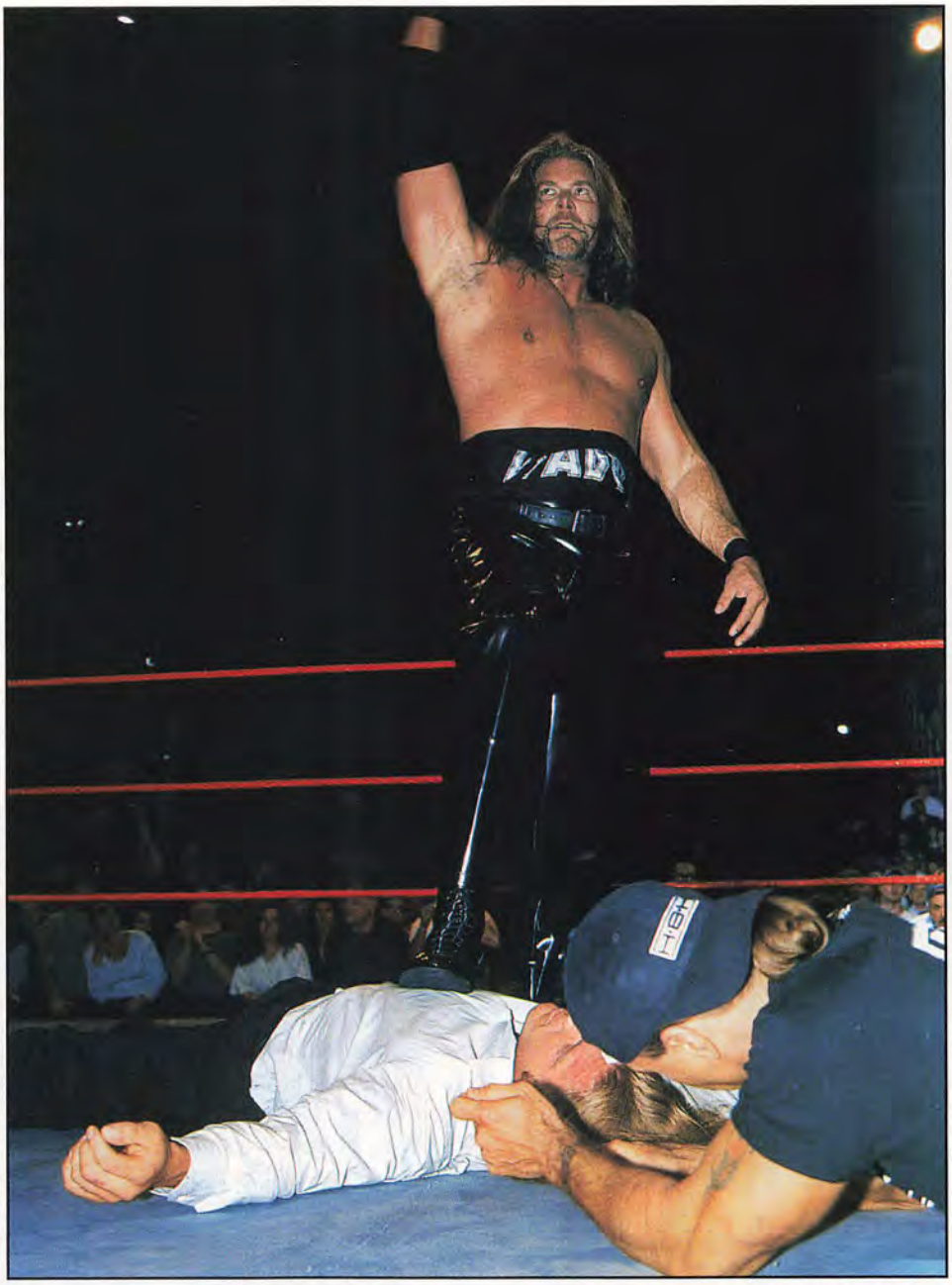
NASH DEFEATS WWE RAW CHAMPION TRIPLE-H BY DQ AT JUDGMENT DAY

Kevin Nash finally got a shot at Triple-H's WWE Raw title at Judgment Day, a full eight years after his own reign as WWF World champion. To make matters more interesting, Nash was facing a former teammate in the infamous Kliq, best known for its political maneuverings in the WWF during the mid-1990s. But times had changed: Instead of carrying Nash's bags, Triple-H was carrying a world championship belt.

Ric Flair seconded Triple-H while Shawn Michaels stood in Nash's corner. Before the opening bell, however, Flair and Michaels became embroiled in a wild brawl that took them to the backstage area. With that distraction out of the way, it seemed as if Nash had a clear shot at winning the title. Nash seized the early advantage with his trademark methodical assault, with high knees to Triple-H's breadbasket. It looked even worse for the champion when he tried to finish off Nash with the pedigree, but "Big Daddy Cool" kicked out. Triple-H foolishly attempted another pedigree, only to have the seven-footer send him crashing to the arena floor with a back bodydrop.

Yet that enabled Triple-H to retrieve his sledgehammer from under the ring. Back inside the squared circle, Triple-H and the referee fought over the sledgehammer, but "The Cerebral Assassin" easily won the tug-o'-war and used his weapon to ram the official. Nash got into the action too late, still punching the champion as the referee called for the bell and the match-ending disqualification at the seven-minute mark.

It was a disappointing match for the fans, who booed as Nash jackknifed "The Game" to the canvas and again through the announcers' table on the stage.



"Big Sexy" dominated, but didn't get the prize

SMACKDOWN CHAMP LESNAR HUMBLES BIG SHOW IN STRETCHER MATCH

In the highest-profile stretcher match since Andre the Giant battled Killer Khan in the early-1980s, WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar faced The Big Show at Judgment Day—and vowed to dispose of his nemesis once and for all.

Lesnar had already defeated The Big Show at the Royal Rumble, but could he batter the giant to the point of total submission? More importantly, was there a stretcher that could support the 485-pounder? Fans in Charlotte, North Carolina, and

"Instead of carrying Nash's bags, Triple-H was carrying a world championship belt."

Lesnar accomplished the unthinkable

viewers at home were eager to find out the answers to those questions.

The Big Show had already slammed the 163-pound Rey Misterio Jr., who had been tied to a stretcher by paramedics, into a ringpost at Backlash, so it shouldn't have been a surprise that the diminutive Luchador ran into the ring at the 11-minute mark and smacked Show with a wicked 619. A few minutes later, Lesnar proved that Steve Austin wasn't the only WWE superstar capable of operating heavy equipment. After dazing Big Show, Lesnar went to the backstage area and reappeared driving a forklift. He parked it at ringside.

But Big Show was already returning to his feet. Lesnar hit Show with a crossbodyblock and several shouldertackles before planting the behemoth with a vertical suplex. An F5 dropped the giant for good.

The Smackdown champion pulled The Big Show onto the forklift and onto the stretcher. Lesnar was declared the winner at the 15-minute mark. He drove the carcass out of the arena.

"Lesnar proved that Steve Austin wasn't the only WWE superstar capable of operating heavy equipment."

LEX LUGER ARRESTED FOR ILLEGAL DRUG POSSESSION

The ex-WCW World champion was accustomed to having his picture taken, and having his image transmitted throughout the world. His familiar face and incredible physique had adorned dozens of wrestling magazine covers and posters. Yet it was Luger's mug shot photo that made the rounds on Atlanta area television and the Internet following the death of his girlfriend, Elizabeth Hulette. Gone was the smug confidence of old. Luger wore a tired and depressed expression in its place.

During a search of Luger's Georgia townhome immediately following Elizabeth's death, Cobb County authorities reported finding 1,700 pills, leading to 14 drug possession counts, 13 of which were felonies, according to Atlanta's WSB-TV. The substances warranting felony charges included Xanax (an anti-anxiety drug), OxyContin, anabolic steroids, testosterone, hydrocodone, and several others. The sale and distribution of Saizen, a synthetic growth hormone, accounted for the one misdemeanor charge.

The 44-year-old Luger was arrested after the search, but was later released on $25,000 bond. It was the third time in two weeks that Luger had run into legal problems. He was charged with battering Eliz-

Very rough times for Luger

Christian cheated royally

abeth on April 19, and for driving under the influence of alcohol after running his Porsche into another car only two days later.

Luger's troubles made many headlines throughout Atlanta, where he was particularly well-known as a WCW mainstay and as owner of the Main Event Fitness Club. Meanwhile, police continued their investigation.

CHRISTIAN WINS BATTLE ROYAL TO CLAIM REACTIVATED I-C BELT

Chris Jericho, Goldust, Kane, Rob Van Dam, Val Venis, Lance Storm, and Christian weren't considered among the greatest WWE Intercontinental champions of all-time, but they happened to be the only former titleholders on the Raw roster. That's why co-General Manager Steve Austin placed those seven men, plus Booker T, in a battle royal to determine the new I-C champ.

Kane, who had lost the belt in a title unification bout with Raw champion Triple-H the previous October, sent Storm flying to the arena floor within the first minute—and that made him the number-one target. The gang attack worked ... and Kane was eliminated, followed by his championship tag team partner, Rob Van Dam.

That left Christian, Booker, Jericho, and Goldust at the two-minute mark. Booker eliminated his frequent partner, Goldust, but the two friends shook hands before "The Bizarre One" left the ringside area. Christian urged his main ally, Jericho, to flatten a vulnerable Booker with a lionsault. When Jericho attempted to comply, Christian caught him in mid-air and hurtled him over the top rope. As the two men argued, Booker eliminated Christian, but the referee had been knocked down just moments earlier.

Pat Patterson, who became the first I-C champ in 1979, assumed Booker was the winner and stood up at ringside with the title belt in hand. Christian punched Patterson, clocked Booker with the title belt, and threw him over the top rope. The disoriented referee saw the elimination, signaled for the bell, and awarded Christian his second I-C title.

Christian's first reign occurred in the fall of 2001.

BRET HART MAKES WWA APPEARANCE

Some might have expected Bret Hart's long-awaited appearance after suffering a stroke to take place on a grander stage, perhaps WrestleMania, or at least a national television program. Instead, it occurred at World Wrestling All-Stars' The Reckoning, a pay-per-view emanating from Auckland, New Zealand. Hart seemed to have made a remarkable recovery, considering that he had trouble speaking and walking after the stroke. Although Hart needed to sit on a stool in the

"Hart seemed to have made a remarkable recovery, considering that he had trouble speaking and walking after the stroke."

Nice to see Bret back

"Flair gave 100 percent effort and reminded many fans—and showed a generation of younger ones—why he was considered so great."

ring to address the crowd, he was the same "Hitman," frank and outspoken.

Said Hart: "When [WWA promoter] Andrew McManus called me a few months ago, I was happy to know that I'd recovered enough that I thought I could come down here and do this … It reminds me of a conversation I had about a year ago, about a month before I had a stroke. I was talking to a guy that was head of WWE in Canada. He was talking about having seen me on a WWA show, that my stock was at an all-time low. And I got news for him, 'cause I don't have stock anymore in wrestling. I'm happily, or was anyway, happily retired."

He added, "I like to think of myself, sitting here today, that I'm a survivor. I've survived a hell of a lot. Life is short and death is long … The 'Hitman' was not just some wrestling character created in a boardroom by marketers or writers. I'm happy to tell you that I'm a real person."

Hart's participation at The Reckoning gave rise to speculation that he might be interested in making one more appearance for WWE, if only to say farewell.

RIC FLAIR BECOMES SHORT-TERM CENTERPIECE OF RAW

When will we ever learn? Ric Flair has proven, time and time again, that he really is the dirtiest player in the game. But, for whatever reason, fans want to cheer him and wrestlers want to trust him.

And it all has to do with the fact that Flair is a ratings-grabber. Just as Flair was routinely used to hotshot *Nitro* while Bill Goldberg often received the credit, Flair boosted the Goldberg-headlined *Raw* of May 12. Flair's match against The Hurricane drew a 4.9, the best quarter-hour rating of the night.

That explains why WWE Raw champion Triple-H picked Flair as his challenger on May 19. But, if Triple-H expected his adviser to take it easy on him, he was mistaken. Flair gave 100 percent effort and reminded many fans—and showed a generation of younger ones—why he was considered so great. Triple-H, the champion in his prime, overcame Flair to win the match. That quarter-hour drew another show-high rating of 4.4.

When Flair espoused his independence from Triple-H on May 26, General Manager Eric Bischoff booked him and Shawn Michaels in a handicap match against the Raw champ for that night's main event, and a singles bout pitting Flair vs. Michaels at the upcoming Bad Blood pay-per-view. Not surprisingly, Flair turned against Michaels, who had tearfully paid tribute to the 16-time world champ earlier on the program, giving Triple-H the victory. Kevin Nash tried to save Michaels from a two-on-one attack, but a masked man ran into the ring and attacked Nash. The man unmasked, revealing Randy Orton.

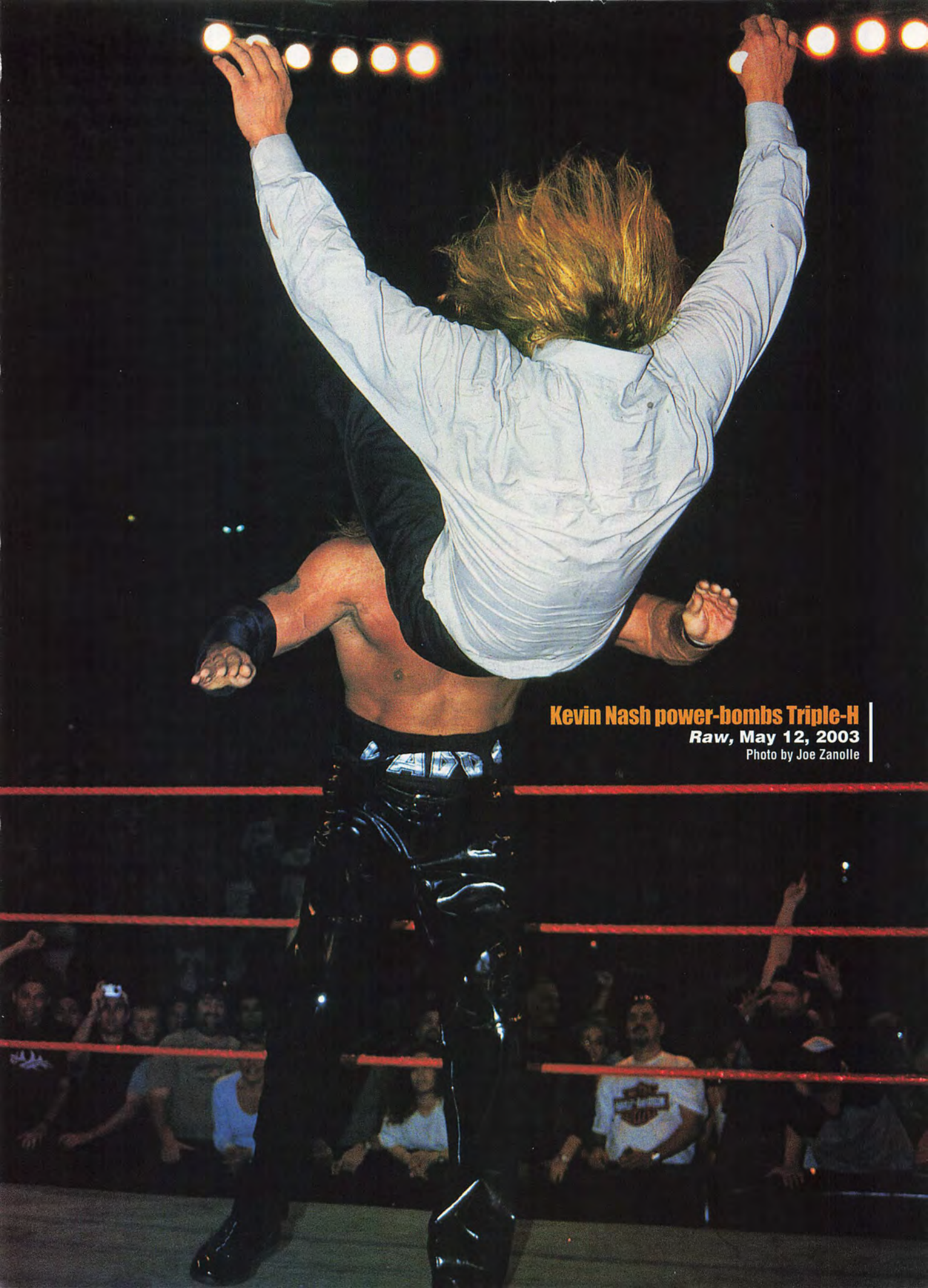
As far as Flair and Triple-H were concerned, Raw's Evolution had begun.

Flair was ready to play "The Game"

SCOTT STEINER HEADLINES OHIO VALLEY'S "SPRING BREAKOUT"

Taking a break from his feud with Test, Scott Steiner traveled to Six Flags Kentucky Kingdom in Louisville, Kentucky, where he appeared in the first show of OVW's "Super Summer Sizzler Series." He was there to lend a helping hand to Johnny Jeter against arch-rival Kanyon and his partner, Doug Basham.

Steiner, a tag specialist for much of his career, formed a cohesive team with Jeter, and the two fan favorites held the advantage until the referee was knocked down. That gave Rob Conway the opening to run into the ring and attack Jeter. Damaja ran into the ring and chased off Conway. That further complicated Damaja's relationship with Doug Basham, with whom he had formed a team on the



Kevin Nash power-bombs Triple-H
***Raw*, May 12, 2003**
Photo by Joe Zanolle

Steiner lent a hand in OVW

Smackdown roster and competed under the name *Danny* Basham. Only a short time earlier, Damaja had split from Basham's Revolution group. Nevertheless, Damaja's timely interference enabled Jeter to score a pinfall over Kanyon.

On the undercard, Southern tag team champions Bradshaw and Ron Simmons went to extraordinary measures before they defended against Kenny Bolin's top duo, Lance (now Garrison) Cade and Mark Jindrak. They ambushed the other members of Bolin Services and duct-taped them backstage. Although Jerome Crony and Morris managed to escape, the APA went on to defeat Cade and Jindrak.

Also on the show, Chris Cage, Nova, and Mark Henry beat Orlando Jordan, Johnny Spade, and *Tough Enough III* winner John Hennigan.

JESSE VENTURA STRUGGLES WITH NEW MSNBC ROLE

When MSNBC executives decided to cancel *Donahue* in February, they were confident that former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura would become their new signature star, enabling them to better compete with Fox News and CNN. But they postponed plans for Ventura's talk show until after the Iraq War. However, after that conflict was over, there was still no "Body" on MSNBC.

A source told The Drudge Report Web site that Ventura was having "just a terrible time" and that "rehearsals have become extremely trying." The program, tentatively titled *In The Arena,* was supposed to premiere at Minnesota's Mall of America, but was delayed indefinitely.

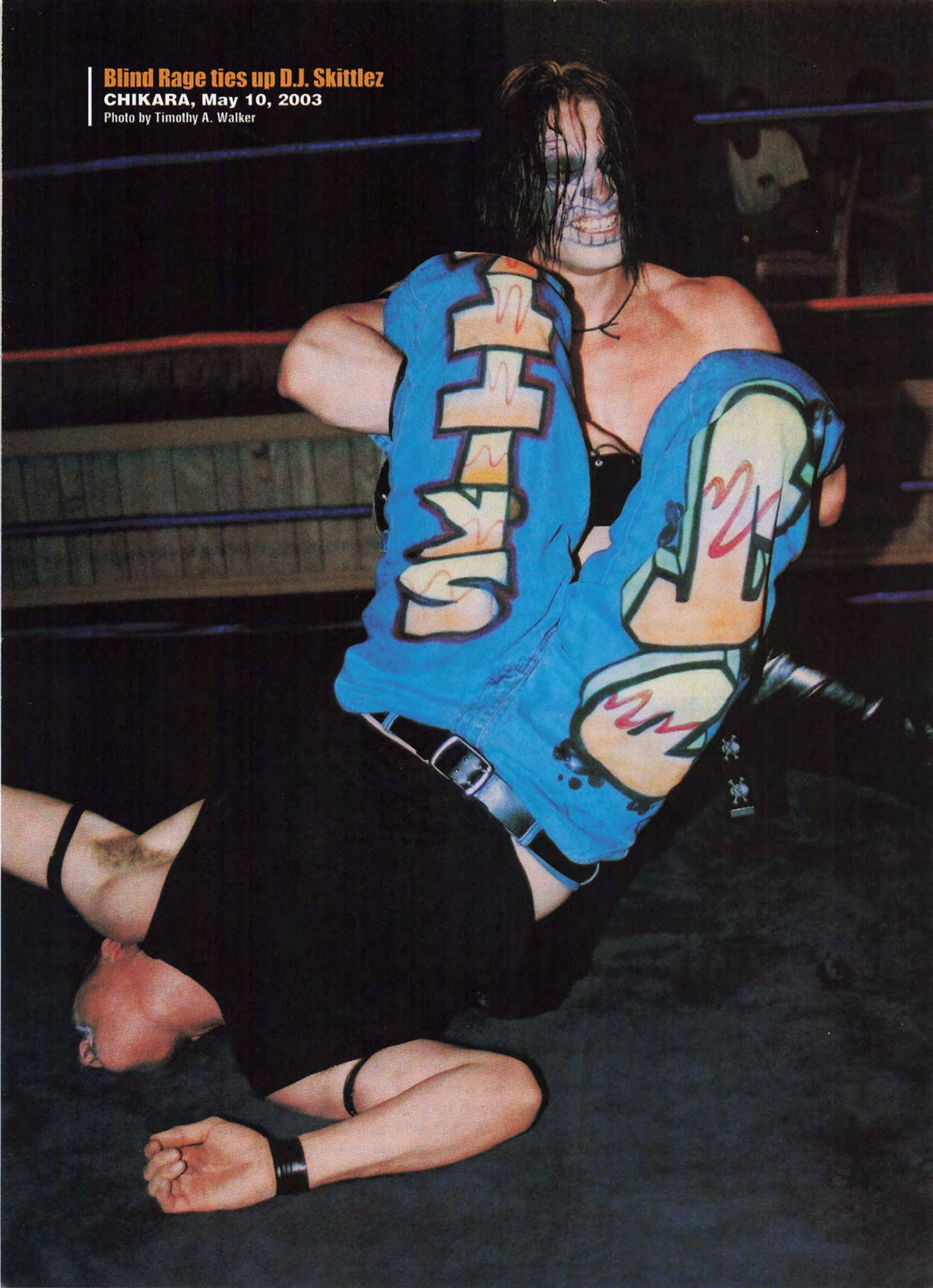
Obviously, MSNBC executives had been dazzled with Ventura's very smooth television presence as a guest on various talk shows, yet had not properly considered his strong-headedness, his lack of interest in prep work, his numerous outside ventures, and his determination to do things his own way. Ventura reinvented the role of the WWF color commentator in the 1980s, but his unwillingness to completely dedicate himself to his broadcasting jobs also led to some disappointing performances while working for a Minneapolis radio station, WCW, and the XFL.

In the meantime, *Countdown With Keith Olbermann* and *The Abrams Report* filled the 8 and 9 p.m. Eastern time slots, both of which had been considered options for Ventura's new show.

"MSNBC executives had been dazzled with Ventura's very smooth television presence as a guest on various talk shows."

IN OTHER NEWS

Vince Russo turned against Glenn Gilberti, costing the former Disco Inferno his match against NWA champion Jeff Jarrett ... Chris Sabin captured the TNA X championship ... Christopher Daniels beat Jerry Lynn and Red in a handicap match to win the NWA tag team title for himself and Elix Skipper ... WWE Raw tag team champions Rob Van Dam and Kane defeated the returning Legion of Doom within two minutes in a one-night-only appearance on *Raw* ... Maryland Championship Wrestling titleholder Danny Doring survived a gauntlet series involving G-Dawg, Qenaan Creed, and Corporal Punishment. Lita appeared as a special referee on the same show ... WWC universal champion Carly Colon signed a WWE developmental contract and was expected to begin training in OVW by the end of June ... Rocky Reynolds regained the NWA junior heavyweight belt from Brother Love (not the old WWF personality), and Chance Prophet defeated Trik Nasty for the Tri-State strap in Parkersburg, West Virginia ... Sheik Abdul Hassan and Dick Trimmins, otherwise known as Da Munchies, upset Mega Championship Wrestling U.S. tag champs Glenn Spectre and Sean Stylez in a non-title bout.



Blind Rage ties up D.J. Skittlez
CHIKARA, May 10, 2003
Photo by Timothy A. Walker

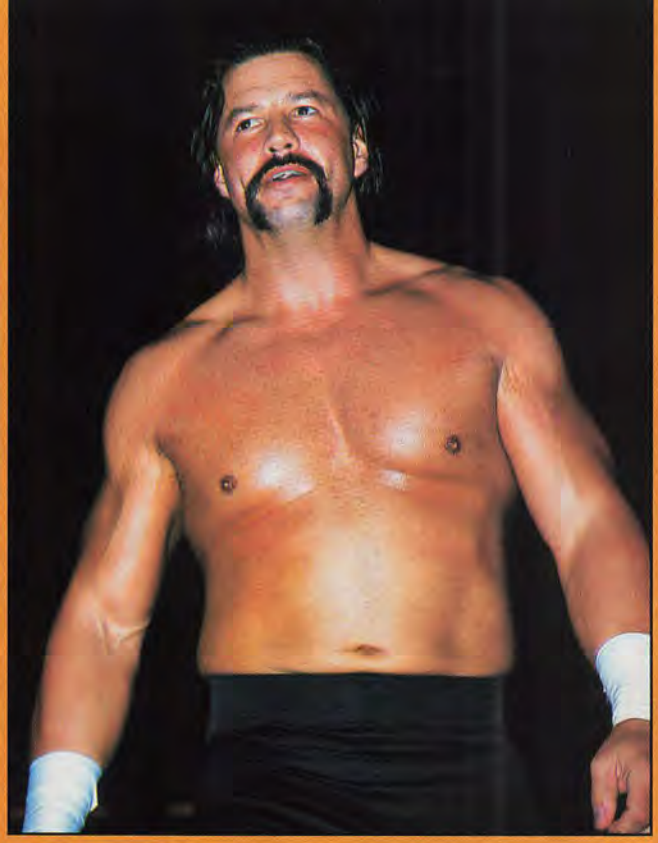
BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH
MTV OPTS NOT TO RENEW *TOUGH ENOUGH*

While *Tough Enough* garnered high ratings throughout its three seasons, MTV executives chose not to renew the program for a fourth. The main reason was that MTV didn't own the show, which meant that WWE—not MTV—received most of the revenue from commercial sponsors. Another reason might have been that MTV is targeting a younger, hipper generation of fans, and wrestling isn't as trendy as it was four years ago. *Sunday Night Heat* had already been moved from MTV to TNN, both of which are owned by Viacom. Creative conflicts with WWE producers might have been yet another factor.

Tough Enough was second only to *The Real World* in regard to the network's ratings, and was often the undisputed leader when MTV aired first-run episodes, usually on Thursday nights immediately following UPN's *Smackdown.* MTV even aired *Tough Enough* marathons on occasion. Overall, *Tough Enough* was instrumental in helping MTV cash in on the reality series craze of the past few years.

Because WWE retained ownership of *Tough Enough,* it reportedly marketed the program to other networks, including TNN, UPN, and the WB. Head trainer Al Snow replaced D-Lo Brown as Jonathan Coachman's full-time broadcast partner on *Sunday Night Heat.*

Many WWE insiders weren't heartbroken by the news, however. Some believed that *Tough Enough* exposed too many of the business' inner workings, and wrestlers complained that contestants weren't getting a realistic view of what wrestling was all about.



Tough break for Snow

Brown looked like his old self again

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: D-LO BROWN

As host of *Sunday Night Heat,* Jonathan Coachman never could have predicted that two of his broadcast partners would soon become main-eventers in NWA-TNA. Raven, known for his dry and sarcastic wit, had been released by WWE in January and immediately reached a deal with the rival promotion. D-Lo Brown, known more for his insightful observations and pleasant demeanor, became an active wrestler on the Raw roster again and became involved in a controversial race-baiting storyline with mouthpiece Theodore Long. Then, without notice, WWE released Brown, but kept his manager.

After that insulting turn of events, Brown joined Raven in TNA. Brown began climbing the ladder of contention, hoping to earn a shot at NWA champion Jeff Jarrett. Since Glenn Gilberti and Raven were keeping Jarrett busy throughout April, Brown went ahead on a more important mission: rebuilding his self-confidence.

He did that by forming a team with arguably the hottest competitor in TNA, A.J. Styles. While the duo lost very close matches to the teams of Christopher Daniels and Elix Skipper, and Chris Harris and James Storm, they scored key wins over Daniels and Low-Ki, as well as Jason Cross and C.M. Punk. Brown had no way of knowing that he would be challenging Styles for the NWA title within only a few months.

The agile big man seemed totally inspired for the first time in several years, flying higher and hitting harder than ever. Brown was showing the stuff that made him an Intercontinental and European champ. *Be-lee-dat, playa!*

Kanyon derails A-Train
***Velocity*, May 13, 2003**
Photo by Joe Zanolle

MATCH OF THE MONTH:
EDDIE GUERRERO & TAJIRI VS. SHELTON BENJAMIN & CHARLIE HAAS

None of the participants in this match at Judgment Day—not Eddie Guerrero, not Tajiri, and not WWE Smackdown tag team champions Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas—had much experience dealing with ladders. And while neither team was quite as good as The Dudley Boyz, The Hardy Boyz, or Christian and Edge in this environment, these Smackdown superstars turned in a superb performance.

One of the most painful highlights was the sight of Haas wedged inside the ladder on the mat, and Guerrero leaping off the top turnbuckle with a senton bomb onto him. Benjamin avenged his partner by hoisting over Guerrero in a belly-to-belly suplex into the ladder. Later, Haas held Tajiri as Benjamin jumped off the ladder onto the Japanese star's back. Tajiri rebounded by placing Haas in the tarantula, but Benjamin smashed him with the ladder to rescue his partner.

This odd couple looked strong!

Of course, the huge eight-foot ladder came into play frequently. Guerrero climbed to the top and delivered a frog splash onto Haas and, later, a sunset flip over the ladder onto Haas. As paramedics searched for a spatula, Guerrero and Benjamin climbed the ladder at the same time. Approaching the 14-minute mark, the sneaky Tajiri climbed underneath Guerrero and sprayed green mist into Benjamin's eyes, enabling his partner to grab the Smackdown tag title belts.

In the next segment of the PPV, Raw co-General Manager Steve Austin told fellow GM Eric Bischoff that Guerrero would be a good catch for their brand. He was obviously correct.

WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Jeff Jarrett: Sting got stung again
Christian: Best I-C champ since The Mountie?
Bret Hart: Spoke from the heart
Ric Flair: Space Mountain still has the longest line
D-Lo Brown: A career reborn

LOSERS

The Big Show: How fast can a forklift get to the hospital?
Lex Luger: Lost his best friend ... and some respect
Jesse Ventura: He never makes it easy
Glenn Gilberti: Trusted Vinny Ru
Billy Kidman: Shouldn't accuse Brock of stealing

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH: RODDY PIPER MAKES MORE EXCUSES

While Sable received the most grief by returning to WWE the previous month, despite a sexual harassment lawsuit and years of badmouthing the company, Roddy Piper also heard his share of complaints. He was called everything from an opportunist to a hypocrite.

Piper's rationale was a bit goofy

"Hot Rod" lambasted Vince McMahon and WWE in his recent autobiography, *In The Pit With Piper.* He criticized the current product throughout his publicity tour, stating WWE was unfit for his children to watch. But as soon as WWE and McMahon made an offer, Piper jumped to participate at WrestleMania XIX and join the Smackdown roster. He didn't even play hard to get.

Piper tried to rationalize his behavior on wwe.com. "What I said [before returning] was that Vince McMahon is sick—equating to the sickness that I talk about in the book—and that he is all-consumed," he commented. "They were doing necrophilia and Grandma's [breasts] were being shown and two guys were getting married ... If you are doing that bulls___, I ain't interested. But that's all gone all of a sudden. Okay. I don't have a problem with it."

"The Rowdy One" went on to say that he was still resisting the stinkface—and that he would never join Vince McMahon's "Kiss My Ass" club—because those stunts were simply below his standards. "[Rikishi] can hit me in the head with a coconut. That's not a problem. But I don't see how we're going to draw money [by me taking the stinkface]. If somebody could explain it to me, and make it equal millions of dollars, or maybe put all my kids through school and take care of them for the rest of their lives [then I'd do it]."

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"I can't think of a better opponent than Goldberg at WrestleMania XX. But maybe I'll get a shot at Kurt [Angle] again. We'll see how our relationship works out from here. I don't know if WWE is quite ready for a unification match so soon. But that's not up to me. But even if Goldberg doesn't beat Triple-H for the Raw title, I welcome him to Smackdown. He won't have any trouble getting a match with me."

—Brock Lesnar, discussing his possible plans for WrestleMania XX, "Press Conference," *PWI,* September 2003

"Well, it was nice to see sharks in the news so much, but I felt badly for the victims. I would definitely consider it negative press."

—Shark Boy, responding to the charge that the slew of shark attacks in 2002 had hurt his image, "12 Questions," *PWI,* September 2003

"You know, I've never been one for tag teams, but this kid has me mesmerized. He's doing things that, well, sometimes border on the ridiculous, and I can't get enough of standing in his corner and being his tag partner for now. I didn't think that anybody so young could teach me, a nine-year veteran, so much, but he has."

—D-Lo Brown, speaking highly of A.J. Styles, "Hotseat," *Inside Wrestling,* September 2003

"We started this company on our own terms, and we're ending it on our own terms. It's not because some other promotion ran us out of town, not because there aren't students signing up trying to become wrestlers, and not because we didn't give wrestling fans everything we had for five great years. That is what gives me the greatest satisfaction."

—MCW co-owner Dan McDevitt, explaining the decision to shut down Maryland Championship Wrestling later in the year, marylandwrestling.com

"One's typical fan appreciates professional wrestling and NASCAR races because, when either is on TV, there are no lines at Wal-Mart. But I digress. For an hour or so, one's typical wrestling fan can forget about making last month's payment on his pickup and lose himself in the world defined by the squared circle of honor."

—An Internet contributor using the pseudonym of "Mr. Twit," proving why he's worthy of the name, msnbc.com

"I don't wish injury upon anybody, but basically, I can go out there and F5 pretty much anybody. That's not a move that's impossible to do. But would I do it? No, because it's a sign of respect."

—Billy Kidman, labeling Brock Lesnar "quite disrespectful" for using his pet finisher, the shooting star press, at WrestleMania XX, wwe.com

"On that fishing trip, we realized that if you put wrestling as a business on a pie chart, you have seven or eight revenue streams. You have pay-per-view, you have merchandise, you have licensee products, you have publications. On the WWE and WCW models, pay-per-view was the biggest stream by leaps and bounds … So Bob said to my dad, 'Why don't we do this?'"

—Jeff Jarrett, recalling how the concept of NWA-TNA was born on Bob Ryder's boat, *Nashville Scene*

"There's a message in there somewhere. I don't know what exactly it is, other than falling from grace and not dealing with it, if that's what it was, not having a purpose in life beyond this business, if that's what it was. It's something that performers in our business have to learn from so they don't repeat the same mistakes that were made by others before them."

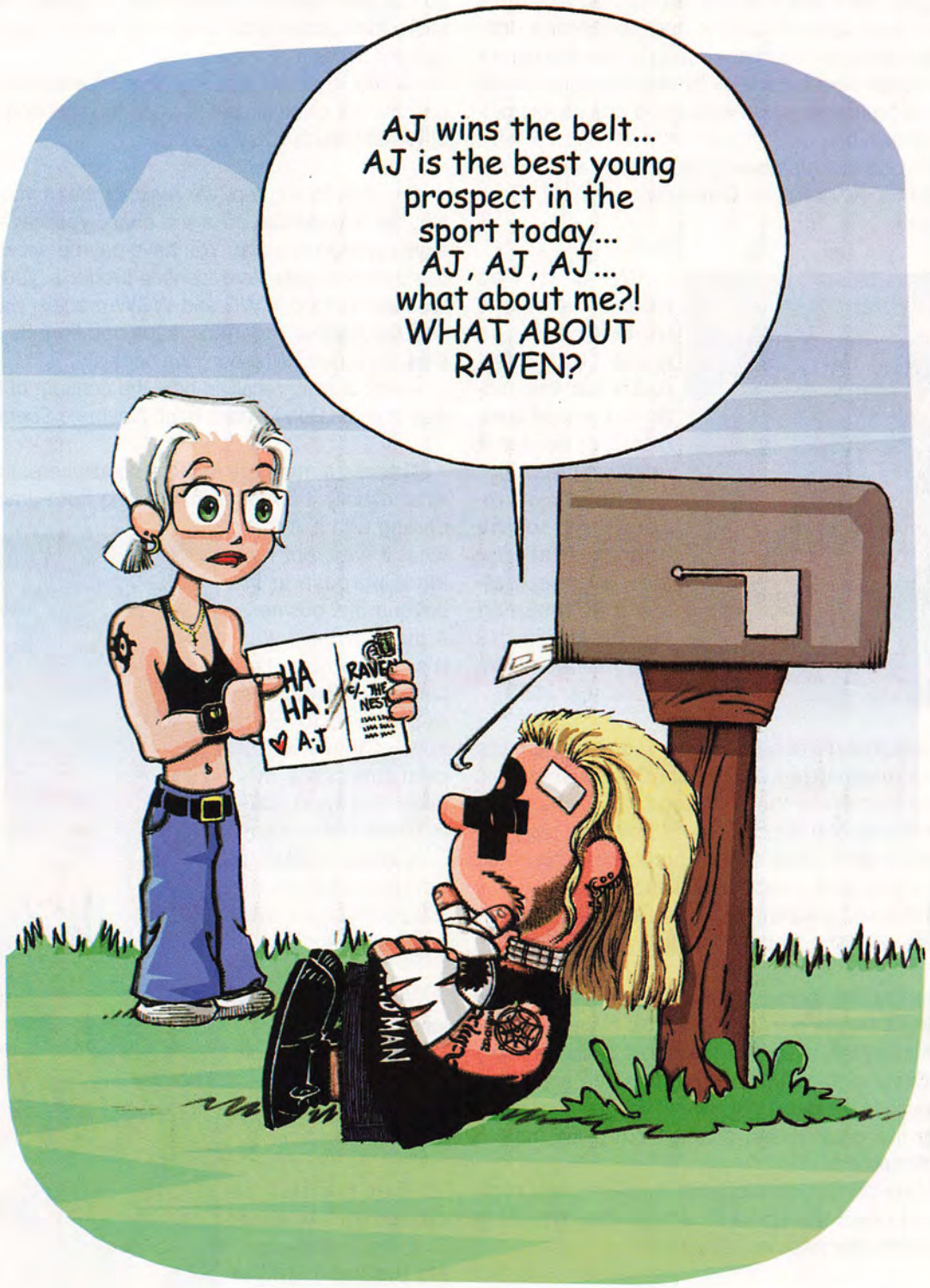
—Vince McMahon, commenting on the Elizabeth-Luger tragedy, *Confidential*

"America is not the land of stupidity."

—Roddy Piper, obviously not aware of what was coming next, *Smackdown*

"Let me tell ya somethin', brother … I am freedom, I am justice, I am liberty for all!"

—Mr. America, sounding much like someone with the initials H.H., *Smackdown*


AJ wins the belt... AJ is the best young prospect in the sport today... AJ, AJ, AJ... what about me?! WHAT ABOUT RAVEN?
HA HA! A-J
RAVEN c/- THE NEST

June

THIS WAS A month of final chapters and new beginnings. Freddie Blassie, seemingly content that his life story had already been written, died at the beginning of June—only a few weeks after commanding the Dudleys to get the tables on *Raw*. That was a fitting end to a career full of showmanship and uncommon toughness. WWE was also experiencing a new beginning, the next phase of its bold brand extension experiment. Bad Blood was the first brand-exclusive pay-per-view. While not a rousing success, it wasn't a failure by any measure.

Over in TNA, another new beginning took shape, as A.J. Styles—who had gained his reputation in the revolutionary X division—took his career a step further by capturing the NWA heavyweight championship in a three-way, also involving Raven and defending champ Jeff Jarrett. But TNA closed a chapter as well, its first year of business, and celebrated it with a special one-year anniversary show. By recruiting Sting for the event, TNA made it a special night, indeed.

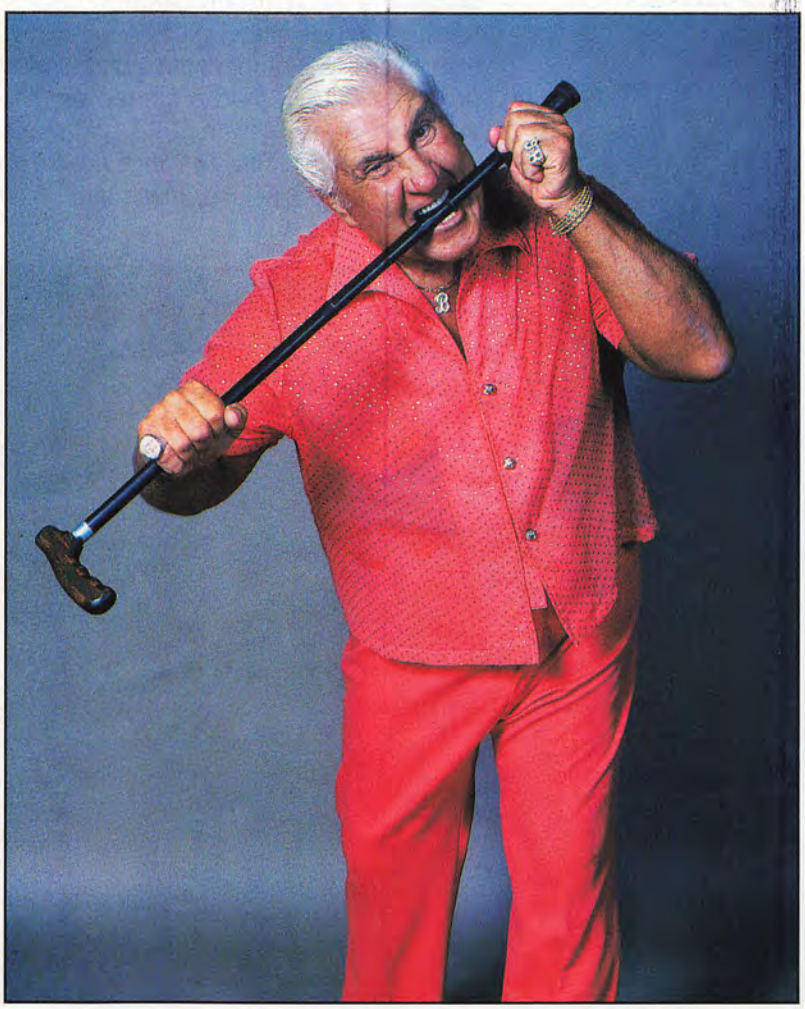
There were plenty of comings and goings as well. Hulk Hogan walked out of WWE. Mick Foley walked back into WWE. Roddy Piper, who probably didn't really want to be in WWE in the first place, was released when he didn't tow the company line. And Goldberg, still seemingly miserable, stayed because he didn't have much choice.

The story just kept unfolding.

"CLASSY" FREDDIE BLASSIE DIES

To modern fans, Freddie Blassie was best known as a WWF manager and, in his later years, an elder statesman/goodwill ambassador in the company. Following

What a life Blassie led!



"The Vampire's' penchant for biting his opponents, causing the blood to flow, made him a box office draw in Japan on par with Godzilla."

Blassie's death from kidney and heart failure at the age of 85 on June 2 in suburban New York, WWE honored him with a degree of praise and honor that it has rarely afforded other wrestling legends.

But Blassie hadn't achieved his initial fame that easily. It was two decades after his 1935 debut that he finally became a breakout star. Blassie bleached his hair blond, adopted the nickname "The King Of Men," and labeled everyone else a "bunch of pencil-neck geeks" during his runs in Georgia and other Southern territories. He reached his peak in Los Angeles during the mid-1960s, and became involved in an epic feud with John Tolos. In a non-title bout on August 27, 1971, Tolos—then the Americas champion—was unable to continue his match against Blassie due to heavy bleeding. That main event drew 25,847 fans to the Los Angeles Coliseum. "The Vampire's" penchant for biting his opponents, causing the blood to flow, made him a box office draw in Japan on par with Godzilla.

Despite that violent reputation, Blassie became a mainstream celebrity, partly because he was based in Los Angeles and also because his charisma transcended pro wrestling. He had a cameo on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* in 1962, and made appearances on *The Tonight Show, The Joey Bishop Show,* and, much later, *Live With Regis And Kathie Lee.*

After his in-ring career ended in the early-1970s, Blassie went on to manage stars such as Peter Maivia, Stan Hansen, Hulk Hogan, Jesse Ventura, George Steele, and WWF champion The Iron Sheik. He was inducted into the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame in 1996 and given the *PWI* Editors' Award in 2000. Blassie is survived by his wife, Miyako, and three children.

WWE PRESENTS FIRST BRAND-EXCLUSIVE PPV IN NORTH AMERICA

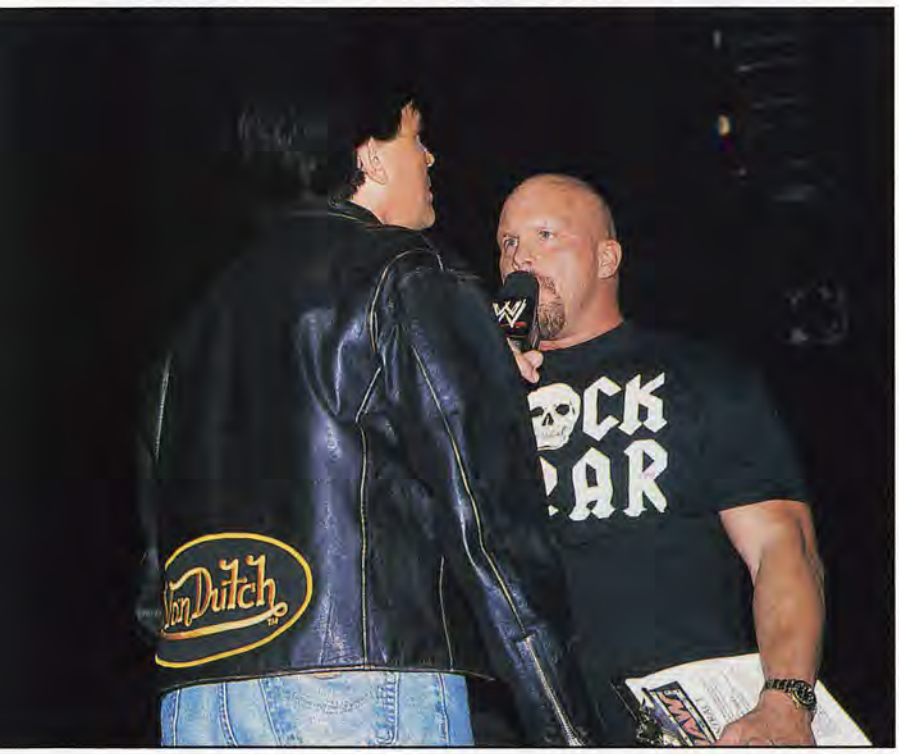
Bad Blood, airing on June 15 from Houston, Texas, won't necessarily be remembered for WWE Raw champion Triple-H's tainted victory over Kevin Nash in a "Hell In A Cell" match, Ric Flair's win over Shawn Michaels in their long-awaited singles encounter, or Bill Goldberg's high-impact domination of Chris Jericho. Fourteen months after WWE's brand extension began, Bad Blood was the company's first attempt at a brand-exclusive pay-per-view.

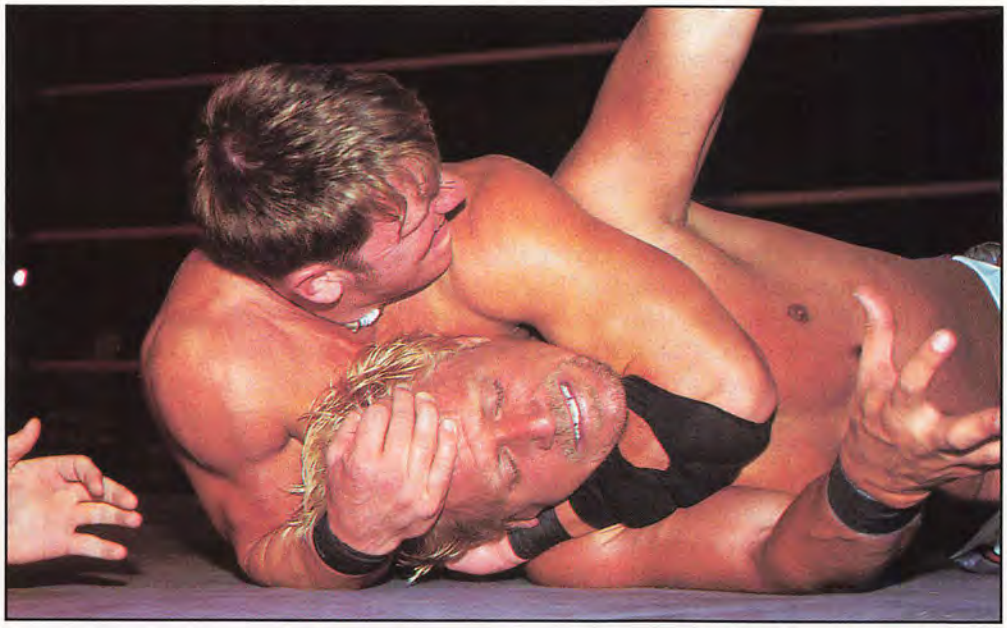
WWE didn't go out of its way to promote Bad Blood as a Raw-only event, still fearing that fans would see the brand extension as a "roster split" instead of an expansion of the talent pool. Nevertheless, the show was advertised as a joint production of Raw's co-general managers, Steve Austin and Eric Bischoff.

Was the event successful? While the pay-per-view didn't garner more buy rates than WWE's recent offerings, the numbers didn't make a significant turn downward, either. By that standard, WWE's first brand-exclusive PPV was considered a success. The criticism of the event had more to do with its reliance on wrestlers considered past their primes, along with its overemphasis on Austin's silly "Redneck Triathlon" and backstage vignettes. If anything, many viewers felt as if Raw hadn't used its mid-card quite enough.

Also of note at Bad Blood, La Resistance beat Rob Van Dam and Kane for the Raw tag team title, Booker T defeated Intercontinental champion Christian by disqualification, Scott Steiner pinned Test to win the valet services of Stacy Keibler, and Theodore Long's duo of Rodney Mack and Christopher Nowinski upset The Dudley Boyz.

Nice effort by Bischoff and Austin





Styles pulled off the upset

> "'The last thing I want my reign as NWA champion to become is a joke five or 10 years down the line.'"

A.J. STYLES CAPTURES NWA HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE

If anyone expected the NWA belt to change hands at the June 11 TNA pay-per-view, the odds would have been in favor of Raven, who had pushed Jeff Jarrett to the limit in a tremendous match on April 30. As it turned out, the victory went to TNA's first X division champion, someone who was expected to lead the company someday … just not quite yet. A.J. Styles' win over Raven and defending champ Jeff Jarrett was a surprise by any measure.

And he can thank Shane Douglas for his big win. Douglas, who was debuting in TNA that night, attacked old ECW rival Raven, who was unable to continue the match. Styles dominated Jarrett and certainly seemed as if he didn't need the help of his adviser, Vince Russo, who smashed the champion with a guitar anyway. Jarrett soon fell victim to the Styles clash, and the NWA had a new heavyweight titleholder.

"I've lived for this moment," said Styles. "But not only do I have to go out and deliver quality matches and wins, I also have to show that my name sitting alongside all those names of previous NWA champions isn't a fluke. I have to show that my name belongs up there, and that it will belong up there in the future. The last thing I want my reign as NWA champion to become is a joke five or 10 years down the line."

Styles neglected to say whether that meant Russo would cease to be a factor in his matches. Nevertheless, the five-year veteran, who had publicly stated his preference of TNA over WWE for the time being and his willingness to wrestle an active schedule, made him the perfect candidate to become NWA champion at the time.

RAW CHAMPION TRIPLE-H BEATS KEVIN NASH IN TWO BLOODY BRAWLS

Kevin Nash tried to take the WWE Raw title from his former Kliq buddy Triple-H in two high-profile matches in June, but failed

"Game" kept the gold

"Sting looked more fit and energetic in this appearance than he did during his final two years in WCW."

in both attempts. The first encounter took place on June 7 at Insurrextion. The Raw-only event emanated from the Telewest Arena in Newcastle, England.

The scheduled main event took on a new dimension during an edition of "The Highlight Reel" held earlier on the show. Co-General Manager Steve Austin informed host Chris Jericho and fellow GM Eric Bischoff that the Helmsley-Nash match would be a streetfight. That did nothing but encourage Ric Flair to interfere on Triple-H's behalf, and Michaels to interfere for Nash. "Big Daddy Cool" was about to jackknife the pesky Flair when Triple-H smashed him with a sledgehammer to gain the pinfall.

Nash got his rematch across the Atlantic in Houston eight days later. The stakes were even higher this time, as the two men waged war in a "Hell In A Cell." Austin appointed hardcore legend Mick Foley the special referee. Foley often tore weapons from the wrestlers' hands, and took his share of punishment—absorbing a chair shot, falling off the ring apron, and spilling his own blood. Still, Triple-H was able to gouge Nash with a screwdriver and pound him with a hammer.

Triple-H didn't need a sledgehammer or any other weapon to finish off Nash at the 21-minute mark, going for a basic pedigree instead, but he certainly used plenty of illegal tactics in the process. Fellow Evolution members Ric Flair and Randy Orton helped him to the backstage area.

Sting dusted off the deathlock

STING APPEARS AT NWA-TNA'S FIRST ANNIVERSARY SHOW

It was hard to judge which was the biggest surprise: that NWA-TNA had survived one year, that Sting was making his first North American appearance in two years, or that Sting could co-exist with Jeff Jarrett only three weeks after losing the World Wrestling All-Stars title to him in New Zealand. But all of those were combustible elements at TNA's first anniversary show in Nashville, especially considering that Sting and Jarrett would be facing new NWA champion A.J. Styles and the returning Syxx-Pac.

Sting, wearing his Crow ensemble, looked more fit and energetic in this appearance than he did during his final two years in WCW. He punished Styles with the scorpion deathlock and several Stinger splashes, hit Syxx-Pac with the scorpion deathdrop, and planted both men at the same time with DDTs. The referee was knocked down in the fracas.

Moments later, Jarrett used the stroke on Styles, only to have Vince Russo nail him with his bat. Raven ran out to stop Russo's interference, but that brought Shane Douglas to Vinny Ru's rescue. Jarrett finally caught the NWA champ with a second stroke, and the referee groggily made the three-count. Sting had to separate Jarrett from Raven when the two men came to blows.

Also at the pay-per-view, NWA tag team champions America's Most Wanted defeated Christopher Daniels and Elix Skipper, Justin Credible beat Jerry Lynn in a battle of former ECW World champions, and X cham-

Christopher Nowinski armbars Maven
***Sunday Night Heat*, June 9, 2003**
Photo by Duane Long

"Sources suggested Hogan had been disappointed that WWE Creative was not treating him as a special attraction."

pion Chris Sabin defeated TNA newcomer Paul London.

HULK HOGAN WALKS OUT OF WWE

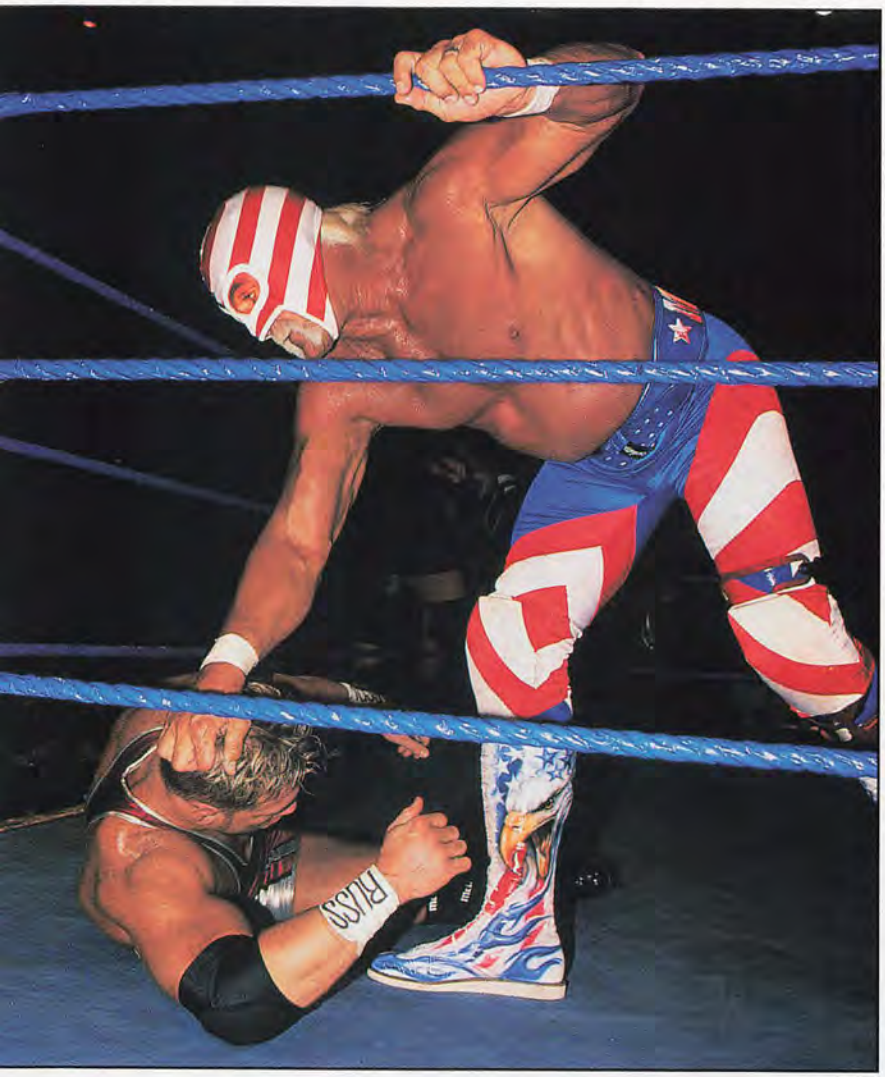
Was it a creative clash? Was it money? Actually, probably both factors played into Hulk Hogan's decision to abruptly leave WWE.

Hogan's last match occurred at the June 24 *Smackdown* tapings in New York's Madison Square Garden. As the masked Mr. America, he teamed with Kurt Angle and Brock Lesnar against Shelton Benjamin, Charlie Haas, and The Big Show. Vince McMahon got involved in that match, attacking Zach Gowen at ringside, which distracted Mr. America and led to The Big Show scoring the pinfall.

Sources suggested Hogan had been disappointed that WWE Creative was not treating him as a special attraction. Apparently, Hogan believed his character should be used sparingly and wisely. His spot as just another wrestler in Smackdown's six-man main event was evidence of his predicament.

Hogan unmasked in front of the MSG crowd as part of his postmatch posedown routine after the show was to go off the air, and McMahon later used that as evidence that Hogan and Mr. America were the same person, giving him the authority to fire the "Hulkster" from WWE. A few days later on Bubba the Love Sponge's radio show, Hogan said he would prefer to wrestle in Japan in the near future.

Hogan's last WWE match?



FORMER PROMOTER ZANE BRESLOFF DIES AFTER AUTO ACCIDENT

Zane Bresloff, a rock concert promoter who turned to pro wrestling in the mid-1980s, died on June 20 at St. Anthony's Central Hospital in Denver. He was 57.

Bresloff had been involved in a serious auto accident on May 16 near Genessee, Colorado, where he ran off the road and plunged 110 feet down the side of a mountain. Although Bresloff suffered multiple heart attacks and a stroke while remaining in a coma over the next five weeks, physicians were amazed that he survived so long. He survived the final two weeks of life without the help of a respirator.

During the mid-1980s, Bresloff was the top promoter in Denver and throughout the Midwest and West Coast, and helped the WWF invade the AWA's traditional territory in its national expansion. He switched allegiances from the WWF to WCW in the early-1990s. He was just as tenacious while working for Eric Bischoff on a national level as he had been for McMahon in the territorial days.

In an interview with the *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel,* Bischoff recalled seeing Bresloff at WCW headquarters for the first time. Said Bischoff: "I walked by a conference room on the 13th floor and here's a guy sitting there with Bermuda shorts and flip-flops in March. I said, 'Oh, great, this is the guy that's going to save our live event business.'" As it turned out, Bresloff did that in the mid-1990s, laying the groundwork for the house show boom during WCW's peak years of 1997 and '98.

After WCW's demise, Bresloff remained

Kenzo Suzuki knees Perry Saturn
NWA-TNA, June 18, 2003
Photo by Vern Verna

"'In view of WWE's inability to reach an agreement on a contract and to assist Piper from engaging in any self-destructive behavior, the WWE is ending any further discussion with Piper regarding a contract.'"

active in various promotional ventures until his death.

WWE RELEASES RODDY PIPER

"Rowdy" Roddy Piper's big mouth has gotten him into trouble countless times during his tumultuous career, but this time it cost "Hot Rod" his job in WWE. Piper appeared on the June 24 edition of *Real Sports,* an investigative program airing on HBO. He charged that injuries and unrelenting schedules forced wrestlers into cycles of drug dependence, and that unscrupulous promoters were largely to blame. Piper admitted to being a victim of the same cycle.

According to Piper, "They all died young and nobody cares about it ... They take them and they screw them up so much, they being the rash of promoters I've gone through in my 33 years."

Vince McMahon appeared on the same program in a one-on-one interview, but vehemently denied those sentiments. "If you can't cut it, get out," he said. "What's wrong with that? It's no different than any other business, by the way. If, for some reason, you have to rely on illegal drug usage to make it, you're going to self-destruct."

After viewing the program, McMahon decided that Piper ought to get out. WWE released a smug statement announcing Piper's release on its Web site. "In view of WWE's inability to reach an agreement on a contract and to assist Piper from engaging in any self-destructive behavior, the WWE is ending any further discussion with Piper regarding a contract. The WWE sincerely hopes for Piper and his family that Roddy can find happiness."

Like Hogan, his last match took place on June 24, as he and Sean O'Haire lost to Smackdown tag team champs Eddie Guerrero and Tajiri.

WWE didn't respond to Piper's specific accusations.

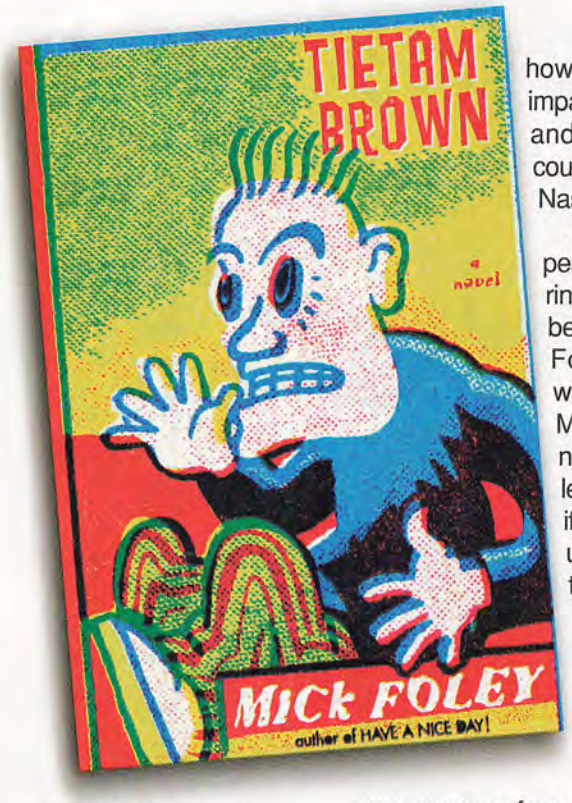
MICK FOLEY APPEARS ON *RAW* TO PROMOTE NOVEL

Where's the best place to promote a coming-of-age novel? Obviously, Mick Foley thought that place was *Raw.* He took time out from an extensive media blitz, including appearances on *Today* and other talk programs, to appear on several editions of WWE's Monday night program, including the June 23 edition of *Raw* at New York's Madison Square Garden. But instead of talking about *Tietam Brown* on June 23, Foley was there to accept a hardcore legend award from WWE. Two weeks earlier, co-General Manager Steve Austin appointing Foley the special referee for Raw champion Triple-H's title defense against Kevin Nash in "Hell In A Cell" at Bad Blood.

That night, Foley had a confrontation with Triple-H, the man responsible for retiring him in a "Hell In A Cell" showdown in 2000. Foley challenged him to a televised match, and Triple-H responded by attacking the former WWF World champion in brutal fashion. He gave Foley the pedigree, but the Long Island native wouldn't give up. Eventually, fellow Evolution members Ric Flair and Randy Orton helped Triple-H pummel Foley, prompting Shawn Michaels and Kevin Nash to make the save. Foley also had a run-in with Randy Orton after Bad Blood. Foley,

Piper shouldn't have been surprised

Ron Simmons overpowers Nunzio
***Smackdown*, June 24, 2003**



Foley's debut novel

however, was surprisingly impartial at the pay-per-view and had no choice but to count Triple-H's pinfall over Nash in that battle.

But would Foley's appearance lead to a real in-ring comeback? "I have to be in shape to pull it off," Foley told *PWI*. "I don't want to ruin the legacy of Mankind. I'm not ready now ... It would take at least two or three months, if not more. If the right situation came up, I'd certainly consider it."

KANE UNMASKS ON *RAW*

After six years of wondering about his appearance, fans finally got to see Kane without his famous mask. WWE Raw champion Triple-H beat Kane on the June 23 edition of *Raw* in a match with a serious pre-match stipulation: "The Big Red Machine" would have to expose his face if he lost.

As soon as Triple-H secured the tainted victory, General Manager Eric Bischoff ordered Kane to honor his commitment. He did. His face wasn't hideously grotesque, as people had feared. But it was disturbing. He removed the mask and a wig to reveal a scarred face and a half-shaved head (he would later shave it completely). Kane's countenance reflected that of a man with perhaps no identity, an empty soul with no compassion for his fellow human beings.

But fans were still hopeful that Kane would remain on the right side, as he teased that he was about to choke-slam his partner, Rob Van Dam, the following week, but choke-slammed Bischoff off the stage and to the arena floor instead. Unfortunately, Van Dam still didn't seem to be making any progress in dealing with Kane on an emotional level, despite the fact they had shared the Raw tag team title. Later, Bischoff blamed co-GM Steve Austin, who had tried to reawaken the fire inside Kane, for creating a monster.

"I've never seen the guy this angry," said one insider. "I think he's right at the breaking point, and I think a lot of people are going to be surprised at how much damage he could do if that ticking time bomb goes off. I don't think anyone would be safe."

In the coming months, Kane would prove that fearful source to be absolutely correct.

"His face wasn't hideously grotesque, as people had feared. But it was disturbing."

IN OTHER NEWS

Kurt Angle returned to Smackdown following minimally invasive spinal surgery ... Steve Austin consulted Dr. Hae-Dong Jho regarding the same procedure ... Exciting newcomer Gail Kim won a battle royal for the WWE women's title in her *Raw* debut ... Rey Misterio Jr. defeated Matt Hardy for the cruiserweight belt on *Smackdown* ... *Raw* launched a campaign to help families of soldiers recently killed in action ... Smackdown champ Brock Lesnar suffered a serious leg laceration in a boating mishap ... Desire suffered debilitating back injuries during an NWA-TNA match ... The Shane Twins upset The Road Warriors for the IPW Hardcore tag team belts in Japan ... Spike Lee sued Viacom for choosing Spike TV as the new name for TNN.

So that's what Kane looks like!

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH:
WWE POSTS ANOTHER FISCAL QUARTER LOSS

For another quarter, WWE continued to slip into unfamiliar territory by losing $4.1-million for the three-month period ending on April 30. The primary reason for the loss was the after-tax charge of $8.9-million that WWE incurred when it shut down The World, its long-struggling restaurant and entertainment complex, formerly known as WWF New York. WWE had posted a $16-million profit during the same period in 2002.

But the news wasn't completely bad. WWE's fourth-quarter loss wasn't as severe as the previous one, which totaled $16-million. Total gross revenues for the quarter were $105-million, compared to $131.6-million for the same period in the previous year.

Changes in tax law also encouraged the WWE Board of Directors to take advantage of the company's strong cash flow, totaling $271-million, and initiate quarterly dividends for holders of Class A and Class B common shares. As a result, investors received four cents per share. Of course, members of the McMahon family were big winners. Collectively, they were set to receive an annual dividend of nearly $9-million. WWE also reported that it had bought back Viacom's share of the company, which amounted to three percent of total common stock.

In a conference call with investors, CEO Linda McMahon claimed that reality programming and a weak economy were partly responsible for the quarterly loss. She specifically cited Bill Goldberg's "disappointing" run as another reason. According to sources at the Bad Blood pay-per-view, Goldberg was incensed by the remark.

Was Goldberg really to blame?

Zach didn't back down from the boss

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: ZACH GOWEN

The inspirational story of Zach Gowen skyrocketed to another level in June, as he became the centerpiece on *Smackdown* for most of the month and received plenty of mainstream publicity. *Smackdown* viewers were enthralled by Gowen's dogged pursuit of a WWE contract and revolted by Vince McMahon's efforts to hold him down. All the while, Gowen was living his dream, teaming with Hulk Hogan (as Mr. America), who had served as an inspiration to the young man as he struggled through illness a decade earlier.

And those were tough times, indeed. In 1991, Gowen slipped while bowling, which caused his leg to break. Physicians discovered a grapefruit-sized tumor, and he was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma, a potentially fatal form of cancer. Gowen underwent chemotherapy, became partially deaf in his left ear, and coped with heart, liver, and kidney ailments. In the end, physicians were forced to amputate Gowen's left leg only seven inches below his hip.

"This is an unbelievable human interest story ... something that can help and motivate a lot of people all over the world," Hogan told *USA Today*. "That's how big I think the Zach Gowen story is."

Despite his newfound success on *Smackdown,* Gowen's story was well-known within wrestling circles. He wrestled as Tenacious Z on the indy circuit and in NWA-TNA. His win over B.G. James in TNA was considered his greatest in-ring achievement to date.

MATCH OF THE MONTH
CHRIS HARRIS & JAMES STORM VS. CHRISTOPHER DANIELS & ELIX SKIPPER

Mike Tenay compared America's Most Wanted's June 25 match against Triple X to the legendary steel cage clash pitting Rick Steamboat and Jay Youngblood against NWA World tag team champions Sgt. Slaughter and Don Kernodle in 1983. In terms of both style and substance, he was correct.

Chris Harris and James Storm, like Steamboat and Youngblood, were determined to capture the gold on this night. And, like Slaughter and Kernodle of 20 years ago, defending champs Christopher Daniels and Elix Skipper were determined to keep their belts.

The two teams showed respect for the cage, unlike most high-flyers of today, regarding it with fear and trepidation. Blood spilled constantly, just as it had years ago at the Greensboro Coliseum. Skipper provided the first highlight reel moment of the night when he climbed the cage, which was taller than the average steel structure, and delivered a cross-bodyblock. Later, Storm held Daniels down on the mat as Harris leaped off the cage with a legdrop that came down on to the "Fallen Angel" with devastating effect.

AMW was all the rage in the cage

Just as the Greensboro match established Steamboat as an unparalleled star, and would have done the same for Youngblood if not for his untimely death, this cage match was probably the best match of these men's careers.

Don't drop the mask, Sasuke

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH:
THE MASKED MAN SURVIVES ANOTHER DAY

The Liberal Democratic Party of the Iwate Prefectural Assembly almost achieved what no one had been able to do to the Great Sasuke in the ring: make him unmask. According to the *Japan Times,* LDP members introduced a motion that would have banned the wearing of masks during assembly sessions ... and they were obviously targeting Sasuke, a member of the opposing Liberal Party.

Because the initial vote was a tie, it fell upon the assembly chairman to decide Sasuke's fate. The chairman rejected the motion. The LDP issued a terse statement after the vote, decrying the result as "very regrettable" and stating that Sasuke had thrown "the Assembly and the general public into confusion for roughly two months."

One reason the motion was defeated was because Sasuke enjoyed impressive support in his home district, where his wrestling character—often hailed as the "North East Hero"—is very popular. In fact, the Michinoku Pro star received more votes than anyone in the April 2003 election.

"To be honest, I'm relieved the rules were not amended," Sasuke stated at a news conference. Ever the politician, Sasuke agreed to a compromise: He would wear a chinless mask to help bridge the partisanship divide.

Sasuke's political enemies had begun clamoring for his unmasking immediately after he was elected to the Assembly two months earlier. How far did they expect to get? They weren't even willing to put up their hair!

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"People hear 'Hell In A Cell,' and they think of me. I don't know if there's ever been one person as synonymous with a match as I am with this, unless it's Dusty Rhodes with the bullrope match. Honestly, it's hard to live up to—not the past, but the legend of the past. I think the fall I took off the top of the cage at King of the Ring '98 keeps getting higher and higher in people's minds."

—Mick Foley, commenting on his most memorable match, "Press Conference," *PWI,* October 2003

"What does how I started in the business have to do with anything? I saw an opportunity, and I took it. If you don't do that, you're not going to get very far in the wrestling world."

—Stacy Keibler, bristling at the suggestion that she hasn't paid her dues, "Q & A," *The Wrestler,* November 2003

"We don't have the sharks that we had in WCW, like Nash, Hogan, and Savage, who were just political masters. We don't have the sheer scope in size and difference in money. That's one good thing about our locker room is guys such as me, Glenn Gilberti, and Brian James are always keeping the locker room in stitches, having fun, and making sure that everybody is happy."

—Konnan, comparing WCW's locker room to that of NWA-TNA, *Pro Wrestling Torch*

"I quit the business for about nine months. I had too much going on in my life, some personal problems. I had to decide once and for all whether I wanted to wrestle or not. It was on June 8, 2002. I was supposed to meet Tony Mamaluke and drive to a show. I got about an hour up the road and just turned around and came home. I was done with wrestling."

—Jason Cross, recalling a gut-check moment, "Introducing," *The Wrestler,* November 2003

"He was always a willing guest on my shows, ever since I started in San Diego. I've never forgotten that. He was a great, colorful guy."

—Regis Philbin, describing his relationship with the late Freddie Blassie, *Live With Regis And Kelly*

"This is my thing—WWE. I don't own one suit. I don't own one tie. I only wear one pair of dress shoes, and that's my bowling shoes."

—John Cena, keeping it real, wwe.com

"If I could get away with it and the circumstances are right, and everything was in order, would I try one more match? Yeah. But then again, on the other side, I've got to be Steve Williams. I've got to make the smart decision and look out for myself long-term, my quality of life as I get older and older."

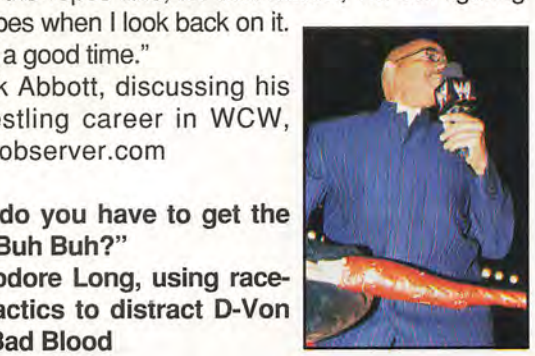
—Steve Austin, addressing his future ambitions as an in-ring performer, wwe.com

"Granted, after the match, Jeff kicked my ass and then gave me the swanton, but for 10 minutes of my life, I stepped out of the indies, I stepped off my path, and I was elevated into my dream, my goal, my reason to exist, and it felt so right."

—Krazy K, describing a near out-of-body experience while wrestling Jeff Hardy, in an online commentary

"It was a great time. I enjoyed myself immensely. It was like one big party with everybody having a good time. I didn't know what to expect. It took me a while to figure out the ropes and, for that matter, I'm still figuring out the ropes when I look back on it. But it was a good time."

—Tank Abbott, discussing his brief wrestling career in WCW, wrestlingobserver.com



"Why do you have to get the table for Buh Buh?"

—Theodore Long, using race-baiting tactics to distract D-Von Dudley, Bad Blood

WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

A.J. Styles: Won the gold ahead of schedule
Sting: Back in black … by popular demand
Mick Foley: Mrs. Foley's baby boy came home
Gail Kim: Overnight sensation of women's division
Zach Gowen: One-legged wonder

LOSERS

Kevin Nash: Lost to Triple-H not once, but twice
Syxx-Pac: Returned to TNA and nobody noticed
Roddy Piper: His own worst enemy
Kane: Jealous of Sasuke?
Bill Goldberg: Disappointed in Linda

WE WANT MATT!!
YOU'RE A FREAK
BOOOO!
WILL O' THE WIMP
YOU GOT FIRED!

July

FOR THE FIRST time since WWE's brand extension in April 2002, the differences between Raw and Smackdown went beyond red ropes and blue ropes. Two distinct wrestling philosophies began to develop, with Raw adhering to outrageous storylines bordering on shock TV, and Smackdown maintaining more of a sports-oriented feel and emphasizing action inside the ring. Want proof? Just read our first two news stories for July.

Vengeance, the first Smackdown-only PPV, delivered lots of in-ring action and fewer backstage skits than Raw's Bad Blood. The three-way main event was about athletic ambition, as WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar and Kurt Angle competed for greater glory, and The Big Show just seemed to be in the way. But even the quarter-ton Big Show put forth a great effort, making it an excellent title match.

On the Raw side, the superhuman Kane abandoned Rob Van Dam and went on a violent rampage. He attacked Steve Austin, set Jim Ross on fire, and tombstone piledrived Linda McMahon. His character was brutal beyond belief, and WWE Creative was not concerned with attempting to weave a logical storyline. It was about the spectacle, not the story.

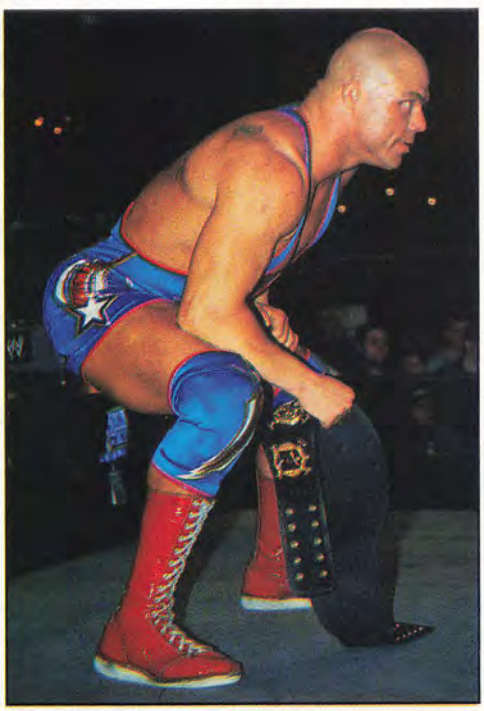
Meanwhile, NWA-TNA seemed to have no consistent philosophy, changing directions almost every Wednesday. Perhaps the Jarretts were waiting to see whether it would be Raw or Smackdown that gained the edge, and that would indicate which route to go.

KURT ANGLE REGAINS WWE SMACKDOWN TITLE

At Vengeance, fans finally got their rematch from WrestleMania XIX ... almost. Actually, Smackdown's first brand-exclusive pay-per-view did deliver WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar vs. Kurt Angle, but there was yet another factor: The Big Show.

The heat of battle at WrestleMania had actually brought Angle and Lesnar together as friends, especially after Angle underwent spinal surgery in April. Angle said that Lesnar called him almost every day after his recovery. So it wasn't a surprise that, following a staredown between Angle and Lesnar, both men attacked The Big Show, even using trash can lids to

Angle got the gold again



Kane was really fired up

bounce his huge head back and forth.

Then they became overconfident. They attempted a double-suplex of The Big Show, but the 7'2" star reversed the momentum and hoisted Angle and Lesnar over to the canvas instead. Lesnar, however, executed the highlight move of the night, planting Big Show with a running power bomb off the second rope. Angle continued the assault by slamming Show's head into the announcers' table.

That left Angle vs. Lesnar for the first time. After a few scientific exchanges, Lesnar snared Angle in a bodyscissors. Big Show seized the opportunity by re-entering the ring and covering both men. They kicked out. Show then choke-slammed both Angle and Lesnar.

The Smackdown champ escaped Show's pin attempt and gave the big man a low blow, knocking him to the arena floor. But Lesnar didn't pay enough attention to his other challenger, who took him over with an Angle slam and scored the pinfall.

KANE STORYLINE CATCHES FIRE

For at least a few weeks, WWE executives had to be convinced that Vince McMahon was correct—that shock TV does produce ratings. Throughout July, the unfolding angle revolving around Kane, his unmasking, and his tumultuous relationship with former partner Rob Van Dam were steadily driving up *Raw's* numbers.

Those ratings hit their peak during the July 7 edition of *Raw,* as Kane and co-GM Steve Austin became involved in an out-of-the-ring altercation. That overrun segment scored a 5.4, one of *Raw's* highest numbers of the year. The overall rating for the July 7 show was 4.2, well above the 3.6 scored the previous week.

Obviously, WWE Creative wanted to capitalize on the upsurge. On the July 14 edition of *Raw,* Jim Ross sat down with Kane for an interview during the regular main event slot. Kane seemed more delusional and unstable than ever before. And Ross found that out first-hand when the sick "Big Red Machine" poured gasoline all over the announcer's body and set him on fire.

Yet that blatant attempt at shock TV wasn't as effective as Vince McMahon or WWE Creative might have expected. It scored only a 3.8. That led many to believe that viewers had been tuning in to *Raw* to see their long-time hero Steve Austin mixing it up with Kane and the high rating wasn't necessarily a reflection on the outrageous storyline itself.

The drama continued the following week, as Kane gave CEO Linda McMahon a tombstone piledriver on the entrance ramp. Shane McMahon returned to WWE TV after a long absence on July 28, vowing to destroy "The Big Red Machine."

"Ross found that out first-hand when the sick 'Big Red Machine' poured gasoline all over the announcer's body and set him on fire."

WWE RAW CHAMPION TRIPLE-H SUFFERS GROIN INJURY

Triple-H didn't mince his words at a July 22 press conference at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, where he told a group of reporters and fans why he was confident heading into his WWE Raw title defense against Bill Goldberg at SummerSlam 2003. "I will show you and the world that this is simply a matter of Evolution, simply about being at the top of the food chain, survival of the fittest," said Triple-H. "And when it's said and done, there's only one diamond in this business and, baby, you're looking at him."

Those were mighty big words for Triple-H, considering that Goldberg hadn't yet walked off the tour bus. They also turned out to be hollow words, because only six days later, Triple-H would be howling in agony at Goldberg's mercy.

But WWE never mentioned that incident on television. On July 28, Helmsley and Goldberg faced each other in a match for the very first time. It took place at the World Arena in Colorado Springs, Colorado, following that night's broadcast of *Raw.* Before their match could progress

Doug Williams headlocks Tom Carter
Ring of Honor, July 19, 2003
Photo by Joe Zanolle

That's gotta hurt!

beyond the feeling-out stage, Triple-H went down in severe pain due to a groin injury. Fellow Evolution member Randy Orton ran into the ring to save Triple-H by disqualification. Goldberg seemed disgusted by the turn of events.

WWE pulled Triple-H from its tour of Australia, and physicians advised him to avoid any physical activity until they could determine the exact nature of his injury.

There had been great anticipation of a match between the two stars ever since Goldberg, then employed by WCW, confronted Helmsley and Stephanie McMahon at a product licensing convention in New York City three years earlier.

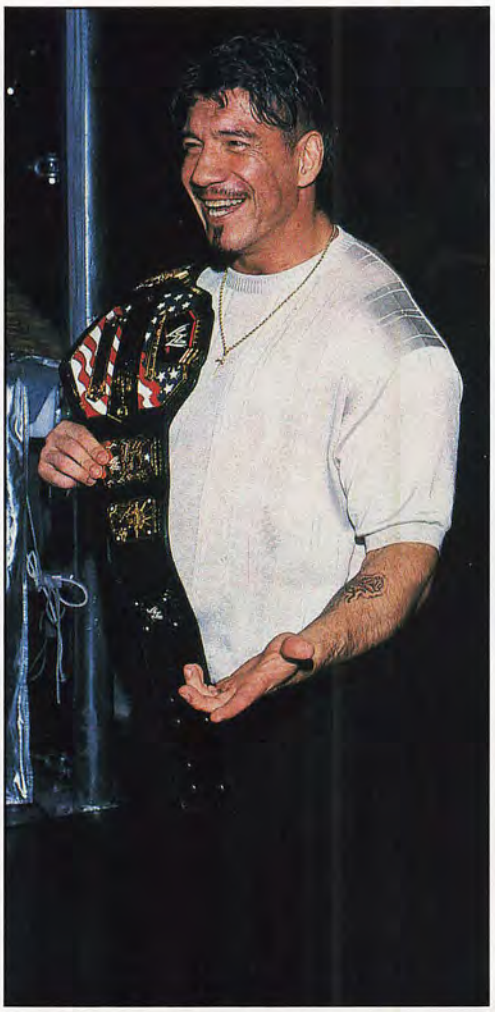
EDDIE GUERRERO CAPTURES WWE U.S. TITLE AT VENGEANCE

Both Eddie Guerrero and Chris Benoit had spent much of their careers in pursuit of the United States championship, and at Vengeance, it was within their grasps. Guerrero had actually held the WCW U.S. title before, defeating Dallas Page in a tournament final in December 1996 and losing it to Dean Malenko three months later. Benoit had come very close, nearly beating Page and Jeff Jarrett for the belt.

Smackdown announcer Michael Cole didn't acknowledge that history at Vengeance, although he recognized the WWE version was an extension of the WCW U.S. championship, which traced its lineage to Jim Crockett Promotions as far back as 1975. Even that U.S. title could be traced further back to a version recognized in Toronto.

Surprisingly, this particular tournament final—the result of an ongoing tourney on *Smackdown* in recent weeks—only qualified as the pay-per-view's opening match.

(continued on page 98)



Good reason for Eddie to smile

"Surprisingly, this particular tournament final ... only qualified as the pay-per-view's opening match."

THE Wrestling ANALYST

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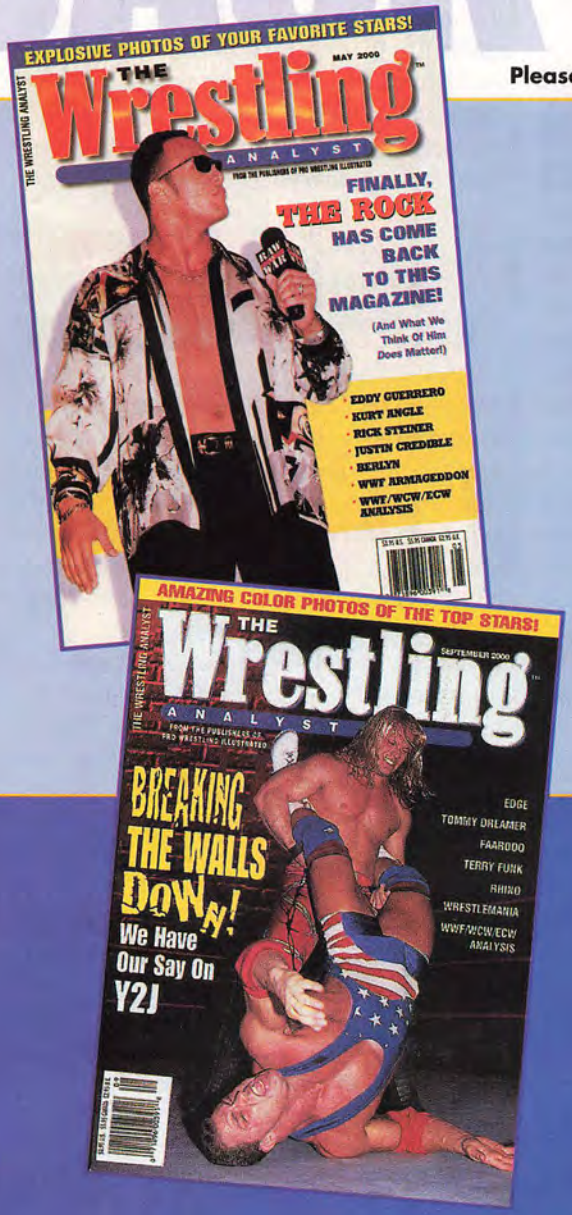

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- ☐ **July 2000:** Rikishi, Test, Madusa, Mike Awesome, Meng, Albert, Royal Rumble, WWF-WCW-ECW.
- ☐ **Sept. 2000:** Chris Jericho, Edge, Tommy Dreamer, Terry Funk, Rhino, WrestleMania, WWF-WCW-ECW.

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"Brown climbed to the top of the ladder inside the ring, leaped through the air, and landed on Styles, splintering through the table."

That didn't prevent Guerrero and Benoit from putting on an excellent bout. After some brief chain wrestling on the mat, Benoit launched into an elbow suicida, planted Guerrero with a superplex, and then trapped him the crossface. Guerrero escaped and later gained the advantage with two vertical suplexes and a superplex of his own.

The referee was knocked down in the battle, with Guerrero unleashing a frog splash and covering Benoit for a long count, and Guerrero tapping out to Benoit's crossface.

When Rhyno ran into the ring, fans expected him to gore Guerrero, but he intentionally plowed into his frequent partner, Benoit, instead. Guerrero capitalized with another frog splash and the referee recovered just in time to count his pinfall and award him the title.

NWA CHAMPION STYLES BEATS BROWN IN BEST-OF-THREE SERIES

D-Lo Brown had vowed to prove what WWE had lost when he was released from the company, and his opportunity for redemption came on July 23, when he received a title shot at NWA heavyweight champion A.J. Styles. The two men had been frequent partners before Styles captured the NWA title in June, but, with Vince Russo guiding Styles' career, Brown knew he couldn't trust his former friend.

Brown had to keep an eye on Siaki

The best-of-three-match series occurred over the course of the July 23 pay-per-view. As it turned out, Styles benefited greatly from the interference of Sonny Siaki and Trinity.

It began in the very first match. Trinity constantly tried to distract Brown, and Siaki even ran into the ring and executed a pumphandle slam on the former WWE superstar. That maneuver alone enabled Styles to pin Brown and win the first match.

Siaki interfered throughout the second match, too, but Brown was able to effectively neutralize him this time. Styles almost forced Brown to submit with a sharpshooter. But the nine-year veteran reversed the hold, forcing the champion to tap out.

Brown absolutely shined in the third encounter, a ladder match. Again, he overcame Siaki's interference to gain the advantage. Then Brown performed perhaps the most breathtaking move of his career. While Styles was immobile on an outside table, Brown climbed to the top of the ladder inside the ring, leaped through the air, and landed on Styles, splintering through the table. Siaki spoiled Brown's attempt to climb the ladder back in the ring. Styles and Brown then pulled the title belt off the rung at the same time, and the referee declared a no-contest, allowing Styles to keep the championship.

CHRIS JERICHO HEADLINES OHIO VALLEY'S KENTUCKY KINGDOM SHOW

OVW's "Super Summer Sizzler Series" continued on July 25 at Six Flags Kentucky Kingdom in Louisville, Kentucky. Many feuds in the developmental territory were reaching their make-or-break moments, leading to OVW having yet another impressive turnout. Of course, it didn't hurt that former WWE undisputed champion Chris Jericho was advertised for the event.

Jericho had already taken issue with the up-and-coming Johnny Jeter, who had been using the nickname "The Thrillseeker." According to Jericho, that was the name of the team he had formed with Lance Storm while competing in Smoky Mountain in the early-1990s. He was incensed that Jeter had taken that nickname for himself. Although Jeter did ultimately submit to the Walls of Jericho, there was a good chance that the two men could meet again. Jeter had recently signed a WWE developmental contract and was already a frequent competitor on *Velocity*.

Rico, a fan favorite among Ohio Valley fans, had a similar issue with Mag-

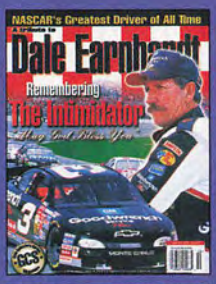
(continued on page 100)

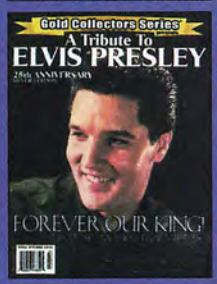
A Salute To THE LEGENDS

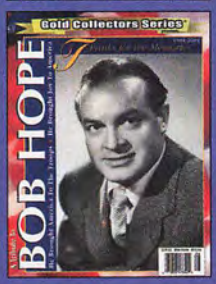
Dale Earnhardt. George Harrison. Elvis Presley. Bob Hope. Johnny Cash.

These men gave so much of themselves to the world, and their passing left a huge void for us all. Their deaths are to be mourned, but their lives are to be celebrated.

The publishers of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* are making these Gold Collectors Editions available so that we can relive their brilliance and honor their memory. This offering is being made only while our extremely limited inventory lasts.







Dale Earnhardt—His Legend Lives Forever: A nation mourns the greatest NASCAR driver ever.

Dale Earnhardt—Remembering The Intimidator: The one-of-a-kind driver more than lived up to his nickname.

George Harrison—The Quiet Beatle: His contribution to The Fab Four was often overlooked.

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Johnny Cash—The Man In Black: His influence on his fans and fellow musicians cannot be understated.

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Jericho jolted Jeter

nus. Just as Rico had done when he competed in OVW, Magnus proclaimed himself "This Year's Model." Jackie Gayda was instrumental in Rico's victory, chasing Magnus' valet, Nikita, from the ring and hitting Magnus with a low blow that led to his defeat.

Also at the Kentucky Kingdom show, Nick Dinsmore and Damaja defeated OVW champion Doug Basham and Rob Conway in a streetfight, Southern tag team champions Chris Cage and Tank Toland beat Bane and Seven, and Matt Morgan used a DDT—along with help from Kenny Bolin and Morris—to beat Mark Henry in a strap match.

ZACH GOWEN EARNS WWE CONTRACT

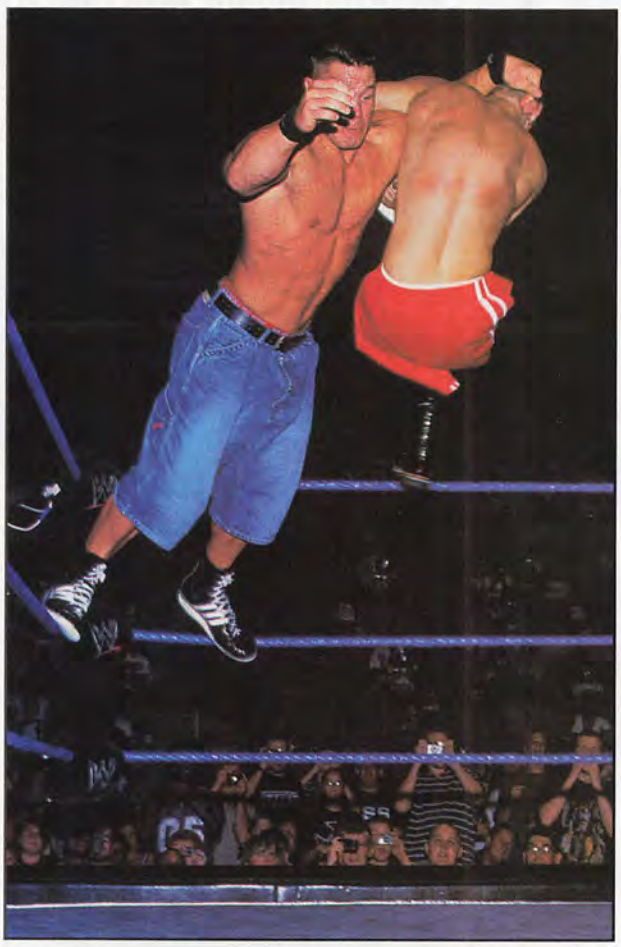
It was no secret that Vince McMahon was targeting Zach Gowen just to punish his daughter, Stephanie. The Smackdown general manager had considered the one-legged Gowen her pet project and believed that he could be an inspirational force in WWE. Vince's steady stream of insults and poor jokes about Gowen's disability proved how low he would stoop to force Stephanie to bow down to his authority. When Vince tried to make Gowen join his "Kiss My Ass" club, and the 20-year-old responded by giving the bare-cheeked Vince a low blow, Stephanie couldn't have been more proud.

That series of events led to Gowen gaining the opportunity to earn a WWE contract at the July 1 *Smackdown* tapings. Vince booked Zach and Stephanie in a handicap match against The Big Show—with Gowen's contract on the line.

The Big Show dominated Zach and Stephanie with sickening bully tactics. He even ripped off Gowen's prosthetic leg. But that still didn't stop the tenacious Gowen, who became (literally) hopping mad, wobbling the 485-pounder with dropkicks, spinning kicks, and moonsaults.

But it all became too much when Vince ordered Big Show to choke-slam Stephanie to the arena floor. WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar and Kurt Angle saved Stephanie as Gowen dropkicked a

Gowen earned the right to compete in WWE



"[Gowen] became (literally) hopping mad, wobbling the 485-pounder with dropkicks, spinning kicks, and moonsaults."

Sable kicks Stephanie McMahon
Vengeance, July 27, 2003
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"Wherever he wrestles, he's using up a roster spot that could be filled by a more talented wrestler who actually cares and doesn't just go through the motions."

chair out of Show's hands and into his face. Angle followed that with an Angle slam, and Lesnar gave the behemoth a breathtaking F5. Gowen climbed to the top turnbuckle and came off with a moonsault to pin the massive Big Show. With that pinfall, Gowen officially became a WWE superstar.

JEFF HARDY BOOED AT RING OF HONOR SHOW

Because Ring of Honor fans claim to appreciate wrestlers who work hard, use innovative moves, and keep gimmickry to a minimum, one would have expected Jeff Hardy to receive a hero's welcome on July 19 at the promotion's first show at the Rex Plex in Elizabeth, New Jersey. It didn't happen. Instead, boos and anti-Hardy chants reverberated throughout the packed building when he appeared.

That was despite Hardy's attempted return to his roots, as the masked Will o' the Wisp, a persona he had developed during his early years on the North Carolina indy circuit. But some fans must have detected Hardy's lack of enthusiasm, and perhaps resented his corporate superstar image. The Wisp continued to hear boos as he defeated his good friend Joey Matthews and Krazy K in a three-way match.

"Jeff Hardy is a freak," one fan posted on a prominent wrestling newsboard. "Being camera-friendly can only open so many doors. He doesn't even look like he's trying anymore. He goes out there, misses moves, wrestles sloppy, and dances like a fool. Wherever he wrestles, he's using up a roster spot that could be filled by a more talented wrestler who actually cares and doesn't just go through the motions."

Nevertheless, Hardy insisted the experience didn't make him bitter toward the Ring of Honor fans. Jeff said he and brother Matt had become instant fans while watching a ROH tape in their limousine during their recent book tour—and that nothing was going to change his high opinion of the promotion.

MARYLAND CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING HOSTS FINAL SHOW

Not surprisingly, there was a sellout of more than 1,200 fans for MCW's final event, held at Michael's Eighth Avenue in Glen Burnie, Maryland. The promotion had developed a loyal following throughout Baltimore and the surrounding areas over the years, and fans didn't want to miss the group's last hurrah. For co-owners Dan McDevitt (also known as Corporal Punishment) and Mark "The Shark" Shrader, who had decided to shut down operations after exactly five years in business, it was fitting that MCW would cease to exist following its most famous event: the Shane Shamrock Memorial Cup.

The show was packed full of grudge matches and one-night-only appearances by long-time favorites such as Headbanger Thrasher, Gillberg, and Van Hammer. All the MCW championships were merged with those of its rival, the Mid-Eastern Wrestling Federation, in unification bouts.

That left only a limited amount of time for the Shamrock Cup itself. For

No honorable reception for Hardy

Joel Maximo flips Jay Briscoe
Maryland Championship Wrestling, July 16, 2003
Photo by Timothy A. Walker

MCW co-owners McDevitt and Shrader embrace

that reason, 1999 winner Christian York, 2000 winner Qenaan Creed, 2001 winner Joey Matthews, and 2002 winner Reckless Youth all received automatic byes. Jay Briscoe and Crash Holly, who had recently been released from WWE, won special qualifying matches to gain entry into the final six-way elimination contest. As an added prize, the MCW/MEWF cruiserweight title would be awarded to the winner of the Cup.

Appropriately enough, the two young cornerstones of MCW—Joey Matthews and Christian York—were the final two participants. Wrestlers and fans alike applauded when York pinned his best tag team partner—and fiercest rival—to end the MCW story.

SHAWN MICHAELS RE-IGNITES MONTREAL CONTROVERSY

Whenever WWE returns to Montreal, the site of Vince McMahon's infamous double-cross of Bret Hart at Survivor Series 1997, it seems that McMahon can't resist playing off that controversy in some manner. On the July 7 edition of *Raw,* Shawn Michaels couldn't resist doing it himself.

Although Michaels admitted to being involved in the double-cross last year, the Montreal fans didn't sound forgiving when "The Heartbreak Kid" joined Chris Jericho for "The Highlight Reel." The two rivals switched roles for the first few minutes, with the crowd cheering Jericho, a Canada native, as he condemned the double-cross, and the crowd booing Michaels as he told the fans to "get over it" and get on with their lives. Michaels didn't deny his involvement in McMahon's plot to steal the WWF World title from Hart before he left for WCW, but claimed the incident wasn't a very big deal. Michaels claimed that he had already apologized to Hart personally for his actions.

Hart released a statement on his Web site the next day, stating that Michaels had never apologized to him directly. He addressed the issue further in his "Sharpshooter" column, published in the *Calgary Sun.* Hart blamed Vince McMahon more than Michaels.

"Now I feel betrayed by Vince—again," he wrote. "I feel as if he's trying to entice me into some sort of a response, maybe because WWE is coming to Calgary soon. This column is my response and, no, I won't be at the show. My father told me, after Montreal happened, that if they take your integrity, you have nothing. I won't let him, myself, my family, friends, and fans down."

IN OTHER NEWS

The Undertaker beat John Cena at Vengeance … Also at the pay-per-view, Smackdown tag team champions Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas defeated Billy Kidman and Rey Misterio Jr., and Bradshaw won the APA's "Invitational Barroom Brawl"

Can we *please* get over this?

"'Now I feel betrayed by Vince—again.'"

... Paul London signed with WWE ... Crash Holly began competing in NWA-TNA as Mad Mikey ... MLW champion Steve Corino defeated Mike Awesome at "Rise Of The Renegades" in Orlando, Florida ... Bobby Heenan presented the title belt to MWF champion Tiger Mulligan in Lynn, Massachusetts ... U.S. champion J-Rocc forced Adam Cage to wear a chicken suit after defeating him at a Mega Championship Wrestling show ... Europe's Sky Digital Network announced plans to launch the Wrestling Channel in the fall ... The Ultimate Warrior spoke at two conservative youth groups in Washington, D.C. ... Hulk Hogan claimed that Clear Channel Communications had approached him regarding a potential farewell tour.

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH: NWA-TNA AGREES TO DROP LAWSUIT AGAINST JAY HASSMAN

Jerry and Jeff Jarrett directed much of the blame for NWA-TNA's early difficulties toward one man: Jay Hassman. While Hassman isn't necessarily well-known in wrestling circles, he had served as the Jarretts' marketing consultant for several months in 2002. The Jarretts claimed that Hassman had provided them with inflated buy rate projections. Based on that faulty information, NWA-TNA went way over budget with its first month's worth of pay-per-views, paying for talent they couldn't afford and leasing arenas that were too expensive. After an In Demand executive gave Jeff Jarrett some more accurate numbers, TNA underwent drastic budget-cutting measures. The Jarretts were even more outraged when they learned that Hassman's firm was also doing work on behalf of WWE.

On July 16, the two sides agreed to disagree. Both parties agreed to a "mutual walk away," dismissing all claims and resulting in no settlement payments. Panda Energy, which had invested capital into TNA to keep it afloat following the Hassman controversy, was strongly supportive of the move.

The case had been scheduled for August 30 at the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee.

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: BILL GOLDBERG

Bill Goldberg suffered lots of abuse after joining WWE on March 31. He was relegated to wearing Goldust's wig, humiliated by a locker room altercation with Chris Jericho, and had been stuck on the mid-card since his debut. In fact, his push hadn't been the same since The Rock—his first high-profile opponent—left for Hollywood.

Then there were the perennial criticisms of "Da Man." They said he was too arrogant and hotheaded to last in the WWE locker room. He kept a low profile, but he survived. They said he was clumsy in the ring. But he hadn't injured anyone since his Raw debut. They said he was too injury-prone to be reliable. But when it came to jeopardizing SummerSlam's main event, it was Triple-H who went down with a groin injury, not Goldberg.

The most infuriating indignation of all occurred in June, when Linda McMahon—while making excuses for WWE's failures to investors—labeled Goldberg's run as "disappointing." Finally, by the end of July, he was given a chance to justify his presence by competing in Raw main events and assuming the role of that brand's leading star.

"Because WWE so tightly controls its performers, it's ridiculous that the McMahons would blame this solely on Goldberg," said WWE analyst Thomas Pilliard. "He was a relatively clean slate with instant name recognition, and they managed to drop the ball on that. They could have turned Goldberg's weaknesses into strengths, but I get the sense they didn't really try."

Through it all, Goldberg kept his complaints to a minimum. Imagine that.

Let's give Goldberg props

MATCH OF THE MONTH: VINCE McMAHON vs. ZACH GOWEN

Steve Austin had to wait three years before he was granted a one-on-one match with Vince McMahon. Hulk Hogan had to wait two decades. Zach Gowen, who had just signed a contract, received a match against McMahon as his first singles opponent in WWE. This bout, between the one-legged Gowen and the 57-year-old McMahon, wasn't going to be a scientific masterpiece. But it was full of emotion, the fuel that drives the most memorable of matches.

McMahon, still dismissing Gowen because of his handicap, toyed with the young man at first. But Gowen got McMahon's attention with some back elbows and a back bodydrop. Gowen went on to rock the WWE chairman with a kick and an Asai moonsault. McMahon rebounded by snaring Gowen in a half-Boston crab. That was an especially tough predicament for Gowen, who obviously wasn't able to use his second leg to leverage out of the hold. He finally reached the ropes for the break.

Gowen then showed just as much relentlessness as Mr. McMahon. He pulled McMahon, groin-first, into the ringpost. Next, he connected with a missile dropkick and then a moonsault. He covered McMahon for a near-fall.

McMahon brought a steel chair in the ring and shoved the referee. Gowen kicked the chair into McMahon's head, opening a bloody gash. Gowen eagerly went for another moonsault at that point, but McMahon, wise to his opponent's offense, moved out of the way. He covered Gowen for the three-count.

Great effort by Gowen at Vengeance

Hasn't she seen Shaniqua?

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH
ACTIVISTS PICKET WINDY CITY ... OVER WWE!

Are there enough African-American wrestlers in WWE? That's always a healthy topic of debate, but there was something just a little nutty about the group of citizens who protested at a Windy City Wrestling show in Kankakee, Illinois, on July 31. They claimed there weren't enough African-American women in WWE.

First of all, Jerry Lawler was the only WWE employee at the show, and he was there strictly as an independent wrestler. Second, Kathy Morrow, who organized the protest, didn't acknowledge the outstanding African-Americans in the women's division, specifically Jacquelyn, Jazz, and Shaniqua. Considering the relatively few female wrestlers in WWE, that's a sizable representation.

"I should be able to see my people in that," stated Morrow, who had watched wrestling with her father for more than three decades. She added, "My dad took me to it all those years. Being a black person, I never saw a black woman wrestler."

Apparently, Morrow hadn't watched a WWE show lately. But Morrow claimed to have logged many complaints with WWE over the past four years. "They're saying I'm the only one," she said. "I know that's a total lie." Morrow said she wanted the NAACP to investigate the issue.

Morrow didn't comment on the number of African-American female wrestlers—or lack thereof—on the Windy City roster.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"Hey, Chuck's an okay guy, but after that whole wedding thing ended, we were both confused about what to do next. I mean, we had been pegged as these two guys for so long that it was only natural for us to want to go out and re-establish our identities."

—Billy Gunn, discussing his split from Chuck Palumbo to pursue a singles career, "Press Conference," *PWI*, December 2003

"When I decided to pursue wrestling, I went to the Hart brothers' camp in Calgary because I knew that they took the sport seriously. They didn't treat it like wrestling was a circus act."

—Lance Storm, responding to complaints that he's too boring, "Hotseat," *Inside Wrestling*, December 2003

"As I stand before you today, I can tell you that I have waited for this moment for a hell of a long time. When I first came to the WWE, I had a couple goals. The Rock was one, and to get that title and to get my hands around Triple-H's neck!"

—Bill Goldberg, telling reporters why he joined WWE, SummerSlam 2003 press conference

"The critics—I've got to tell you—I wouldn't care if you believed in Jesus Christ and we brought Him back as a guest appearance, we would be criticized for doing that by that audience."

—Vince McMahon, criticizing the Internet critics, *Rocky Mountain News*

"My personal friendship with 'Stone-Cold,' and I'd be the first to admit it, has probably been a conflict of interest. I should not have those personal feelings about any talent in my role as head of talent, but it just happened that we're buddies and developed a friendship."

—Jim Ross, analyzing his relationship with Steve Austin, *Kingston Whig-Standard*

"I had to convince [Vince McMahon] that before it was done, it really wasn't that big a deal. And that was probably the biggest success in that I did a heck of a sales job and told him that I would be in very little danger at all."

—Mick Foley, talking about his legendary fall at King of the Ring 1998, *Pro Wrestling Torch*

"It's a natural thing. It's menstrual. It's also why I'm in such a bad mood and cut such mean promos."

—C.M. Punk, explaining why he bleeds so much, "12 Questions," *PWI*, December 2003

"I believe that God has a purpose for me, and that's to be the best wrestler there ever was. That's really why I feel I'm here. I want to be Ric Flair, a man who is considered the greatest not only by the fans, but his peers."

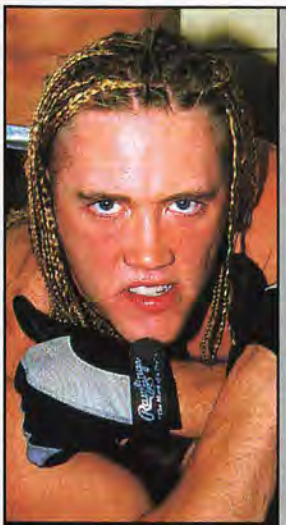
—Kurt Angle, expressing his frame of mind after regaining the WWE Smackdown title at Vengeance, wwe.com

"It always gets you going 150 percent when you walk into the Garden. When you think back to all the people that ever performed here—whether it be Frank Sinatra, the circus, the NBA, the NHL, wrestling—all the great names that stood out there, and here you are in the middle of the ring, with a sold-out crowd, in the main event. There's nothing like Madison Square Garden in the world."

—Sgt. Slaughter, describing the mystique of the world's most famous arena, wwe.com

"There's not a character with as much depth as mine with the capability to go in so many different directions. Even the guys who can't stand me in the locker room agree to that."

—Raven, reflecting upon his wrestling persona, wrestlingobserver.com



WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Kurt Angle: Stuck his neck out for more gold
Eddie Guerrero: Finally escaped Benoit's shadow
Zach Gowen: Became a WWE superstar
Christian York: Shamrock Cup winner again
Bill Goldberg: His groin stayed intact

LOSERS

Jim Ross: Burned by Kane ... and Creative
Triple-H: Goldberg was still standing
Vince McMahon: You're despicable
Jeff Hardy: ROH fans lost their passion for him
Shawn Michaels: Get over it!

People doubted
I could do it,
but I showed them
what was what.
I beat the 'taker
single-handed...
then they bitched
'bout the push I got.
UNDERTAKER
RIP

ugust

SUDDENLY, IT SEEMED as if WWE didn't hold a monopoly over pro wrestling anymore. In the strict sense, it never did, but there's no question that since WCW's demise in 2001, WWE dominated the industry like no other promotion in history. But, finally, the brand extension started to take hold, as Raw and Smackdown presented distinctly different products. Aside from WWE offering its own alternatives, NWA-TNA and Ring of Honor stole the headlines like never before, giving rise to the feeling that wrestling was more diverse than it had been in a long while.

WWE Raw champion Triple-H's victory in the "Elimination Chamber" at SummerSlam couldn't have been more cowardly, while Smackdown champion Kurt Angle's win over Brock Lesnar couldn't have been more inspiring. Over in TNA, NWA champion A.J. Styles—although aided by the interference of Vince Russo—scored impressive victories over Low-Ki and Raven. Styles, Low-Ki, and Raven were also helping Ring of Honor gain a national following. Jim Cornette's debut also helped to grow ROH's fan base.

Overall, Smackdown and Ring of Honor presented the best athletic performances around, while the Raw creative team seemed to delight in how far it could take the outrageous Kane-Shane McMahon-Eric Bischoff feud. NWA-TNA continued to deliver some ROH-quality action, but often with a "Russo-esque" twist. Yes, the menu offered a smorgasbord of options in August.

WWE RAW CHAMPION TRIPLE-H SURVIVES THE "ELIMINATION CHAMBER"

Considering that Rob Van Dam's errant knee crushed Triple-H's larynx in his first "Elimination Chamber" match, one could understand why the WWE Raw champion would be hesitant to join the fray at SummerSlam 2003. But more than haunting memories of last year's Survivor Series were plaguing Triple-H. He had suffered a severely torn groin during a singles match against Bill Goldberg at the World Arena in Colorado Springs, Colorado, following the July 28 edition of *Raw*.

That explained why Triple-H kept a low profile during his Raw title defense against his five challengers—Bill Goldberg, Shawn Michaels, Chris Jericho, Kevin Nash, and Randy Orton—in the "Elimination Chamber" at SummerSlam. Michaels and Jericho began the match, with the others allowed in at three-minute intervals, unlike the five-minute periods stipulat-

"Survived" is the word for what HHH did

"Lesnar reached the ropes three times, yet Chioda allowed Angle to keep pulling him back until he submitted."

ed in 2002's "Elimination Chamber" showdown. Orton came in next, followed by Nash. After Nash mangled Jericho's face against the steel mesh and prepared to power bomb him, Michaels superkicked his best buddy, allowing Jericho to score a pinfall over him.

When Triple-H finally entered the ring at the nine-minute mark, Michaels superkicked him, which conveniently knocked Helmsley out cold for several minutes. Meanwhile, Goldberg was allowed in at the 12-minute mark, spearing Orton for a pinfall, and eliminating Michaels and Jericho with spear-and-jackhammer combinations.

Triple-H hid in his chamber until Goldberg kicked out the glass and forced him out.

Soon, Ric Flair handed a sledgehammer to Helmsley, who drilled Goldberg with it for the tainted victory.

KURT ANGLE RETAINS WWE SMACKDOWN TITLE AGAINST BROCK LESNAR

At SummerSlam, WWE Smackdown champion Kurt Angle and Brock Lesnar sought to top their previous PPV match at WrestleMania XIX. They came very, very close.

Lesnar got a little too cocky

Of course, fans were wondering whether Lesnar could pull off the same feat he did at WrestleMania: to beat Angle for the Smackdown title. Lesnar dominated Angle in the early going, hoisting the champion for an overhead press-slam and dumping him over the top rope. When Angle made it back into the ring, Lesnar tossed him with an overhead belly-to-belly suplex. Then Lesnar caught Angle by the leg and planted him with a Samoan drop. The 2000 NCAA heavyweight champ kicked the Olympic gold medalist in the mouth, drawing blood and proving that neither man was in the amateurs anymore.

But Lesnar missed a shoulderblock and went flying into the ringpost. Angle seized the opening, executing three German suplexes on Lesnar. But Lesnar retaliated with another overhead belly-to-belly and went for the F5. Angle barely escaped. Lesnar tried again. This time, Angle turned the F5 into a DDT. The Smackdown champ attempted an anklelock, but Lesnar wriggled free and knocked Angle into referee Mike Chioda.

When Angle snared Lesnar in the anklelock, Lesnar tapped and tapped. Vince McMahon ran to ringside, grabbed a chair, and hit Angle in the back with it. Lesnar, summoning all his strength, hopped up, and, on one leg, used the F5 on Angle. But the champion kicked out and clamped on the anklelock again. Lesnar reached the ropes three times, yet Chioda allowed Angle to keep pulling him back until he submitted after 21 minutes of action. Amazingly, Angle had bested Lesnar in two consecutive pay-per-view showdowns.

TACKY STORYLINE LEADS TO SHANE McMAHON-ERIC BISCHOFF MATCH

After Kane gave Linda McMahon a tombstone piledriver on the *Raw* set's entrance ramp in July, Shane McMahon had more than enough reason to make an on-air return and seek vengeance against Kane. But co-General Manager Eric Bischoff wasn't going to make it that easy … and he was more than willing to add fuel to Kane's fire.

In an offshoot of the bizarre Kane story-

Tommy Dreamer thwarts Victoria
***Sunday Night Heat*, August 11, 2003**
Photo by James McAfee

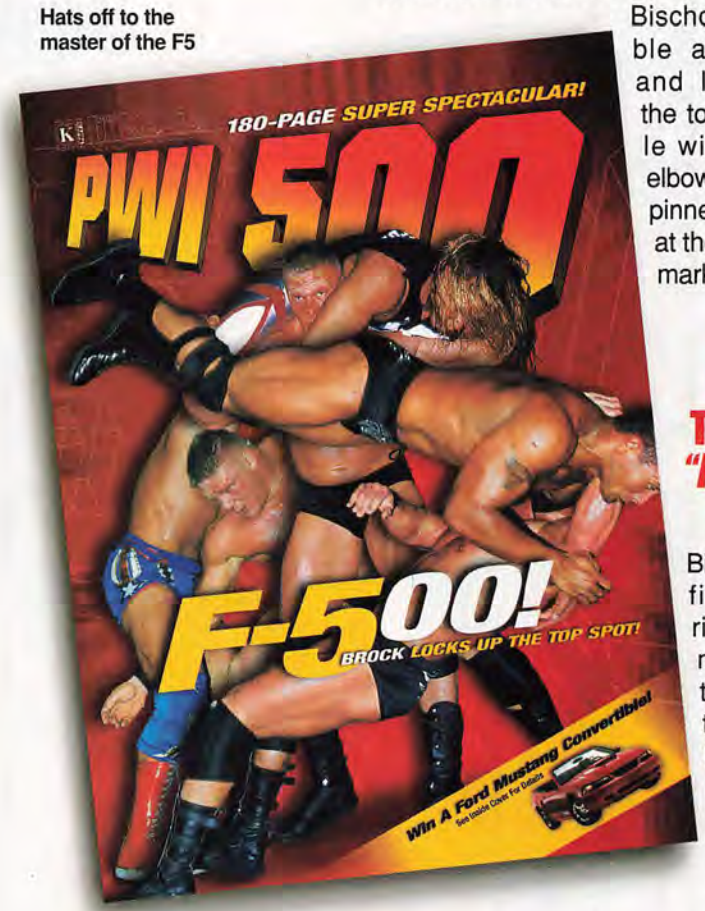
"What are you doing running around eating hamburgers when you've got a hot, juicy, delicious filet mignon at home?'"

line, Bischoff invaded the McMahons' Connecticut mansion. He threatened Linda in a sexually suggestive manner in a vignette laced with uncomfortable rapist overtones. Cameras cut away from Linda's home office when it appeared that Bischoff was about to make his dastardly move. Within a week, co-GM Steve Austin had granted Shane a match against Bischoff at SummerSlam 2003.

Although Linda would later deny that anything happened after the camera stopped rolling, Bischoff appeared at SummerSlam and blatantly asked: "What are you (referring to Vince McMahon) doing running around eating hamburgers when you've got a hot, juicy, delicious filet mignon at home?" That incensed Shane even more, and he attacked Bischoff with great intensity. But *Sunday Night Heat* host Jonathan Coachman made an unexpected appearance at ringside and hit Shane with a chair. Steve Austin arrived on the scene and, after Coachman shoved him, neutralized the announcer with a stunner.

Shane threw Bischoff's limp arm into Austin, giving "Stone-Cold" the legal provocation to respond. Austin gave Bischoff a stunner. Shane placed Bischoff on a table at ringside and leaped off the top turnbuckle with a flying elbowsmash. He pinned "Easy E" at the 10-minute mark.

Hats off to the master of the F5



BROCK LESNAR TOPS THE "*PWI* 500"

"The Next Big Thing" officially arrived as the most important wrestler in the business, thanks to his number-one ranking in the "*PWI* 500" in 2003. *PWI* editors made the decision in early-August. Brock Lesnar beat out 499 other men—including fellow top-10 finishers WWE Raw champion Triple-H, Kurt Angle, Keiji Muto, and Chris Jericho—to earn the honor.

Why was Lesnar so worthy of the ranking? It was because he emerged from OVW's training program to become WWE's most dominant star in 2003. With Steve Austin, The Rock, Hulk Hogan, Batista, Randy Orton, and Edge all being ranked lower on the list—or knocked off completely—due to injuries or other factors, Lesnar was the only logical choice.

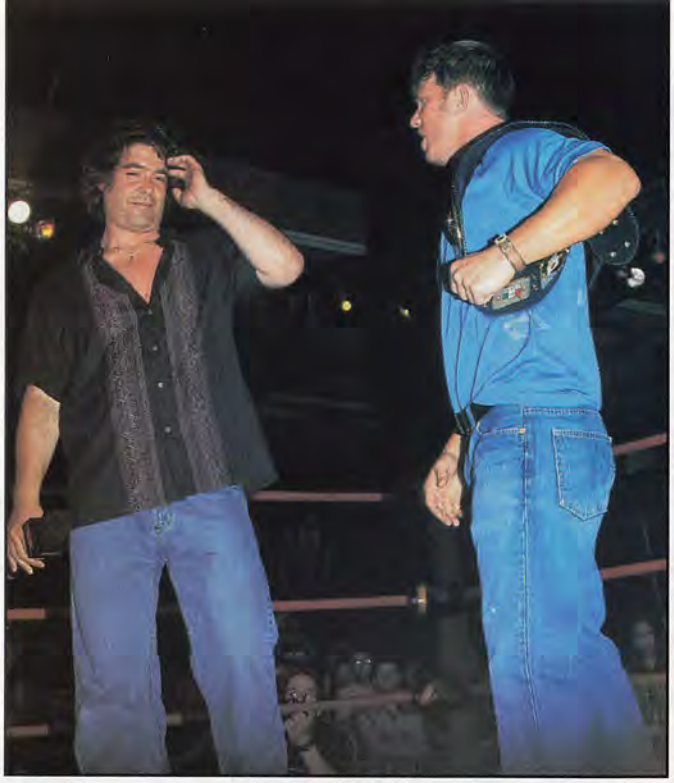
Lesnar's accomplishments for the evaluation period between August 2002 and July '03 were truly impressive. He had defeated The Rock for the WWE undisputed title at SummerSlam 2002, won the Royal Rumble, dominated The Big Show in a series of matches, defeated Kurt Angle for the Smackdown title at WrestleMania XIX, and retained the belt against John Cena at Backlash. Even his botched shooting star press at WrestleMania, from which Lesnar sustained a concussion, was an example of his awesome tenacity.

His amateur background—including a 106-5 record at the University of Minnesota, two Big 10 titles, and the 2000 NCAA heavyweight championship—combined with his fantastic physique prompted some to describe Lesnar as a combination of Kurt Angle and Bill Goldberg. Whether that was true or not, Lesnar had an incredible run in 2002-2003.

NWA CHAMPION A.J. STYLES RETAINS TITLE AGAINST RAVEN

Only four months after Raven's match against then-NWA champ Jeff Jarrett earned rave reviews, the 14-year veteran turned in another amazing performance against new NWA heavyweight champion A.J. Styles on August 27 at the Fairgrounds Coliseum in Nashville.

Both the innovative Styles and the crafty Raven employed various styles throughout the match, including brawling, hardcore, high-flying, and mat grappling. The match clearly demonstrated the versatility of both athletes. The only downside was the constant interference of Vince Russo, who was determined that his charge, Styles, would emerge victorious.



Russo and Styles were an effective team

But that would come at a high cost. The blood started flowing within the first few minutes. Raven attempted to use his drop toehold to send Styles into a chair he had placed in the ring, but "The Phenom" catapulted himself off the chair and onto the top rope, and launched into a springboard. Raven instantly grabbed the chair and swatted Styles out of the air. That complicated exchange took only a few seconds.

That's when a great match turned sour. As if the constant interference of Russo weren't enough, James Mitchell's New Church cronies, Sinn and Slash, along with Shane Douglas, all attacked Raven after the referee had been knocked down in the melee. That enabled the NWA champion to plant Raven with the Styles clash and unnecessarily cheat to another win.

CHRISTIAN BEATS BOOKER T FOR INTERCONTINENTAL TITLE

A deteriorating back condition was the major factor that led to Booker T dropping the Intercontinental championship to Christian at a house show on August 10 in Des Moines, Iowa. Booker T winced in pain as he tried to put away Christian with a scissors kick, but he was unable to complete the move. Christian capitalized by nailing Booker with the unprettier and scored the pinfall. No camera was at ringside to videotape the title change.

Booker had been dealing with back pain for several years, and he had reached the point of sheer agony after a 20-hour flight returning from WWE's tour of Australia. He went home to recover, even missing that week's *Raw,* but it soon became obvious that Booker couldn't hold on to the belt for long. Booker T had defeated Christian for the championship on July 7 in Montreal, Quebec. He was expected to miss four to six weeks due to a herniated disk.

"Booker T doesn't have the backbone to be the Intercontinental champion," said Christian. "I'm just sorry there wasn't a camera at ringside to document my fantastic victory. It's just another WWE conspiracy to deny a Canadian his rightful glory."

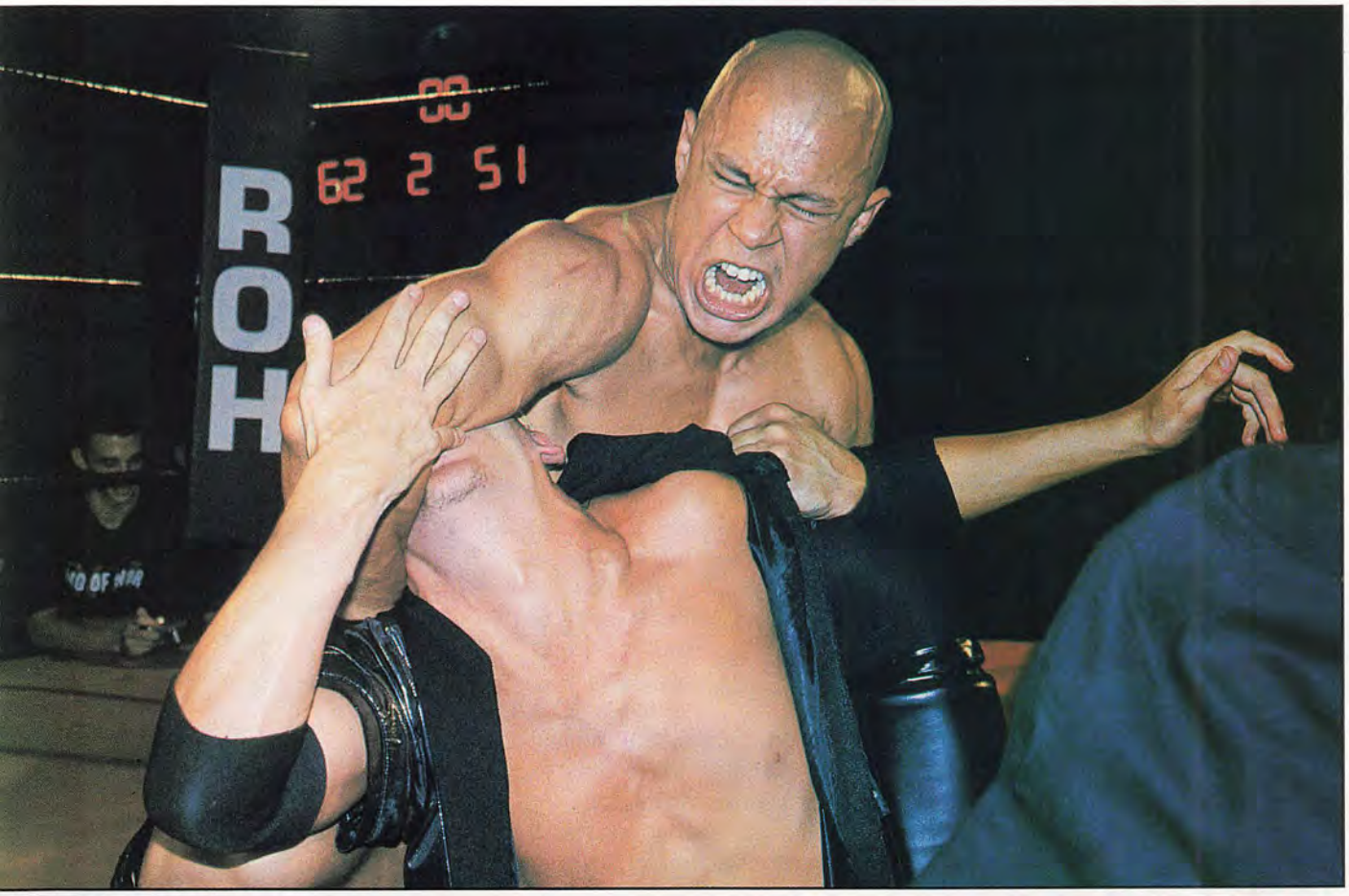
The title change marked the start of a third I-C title reign for Christian, who had beaten Edge for the belt nearly two years earlier and won it again in a battle royal in May. His upset victory came as a surprise to the Des Moines fans, who had grown accustomed to title changes occurring only on television or pay-per-view. In fact, it had been four years since the I-C belt had changed hands at a non-televised event. Ironically, Edge had done it at Toronto's SkyDome on July 24, 1999. He lost the title back to Jeff Jarrett the following day.

LOW-KI INJURES DAN MAFF AT RING OF HONOR EVENT

At the August 13 NWA-TNA pay-per-view, Low-Ki had arguably the best night of his career. He almost defeated NWA champion A.J. Styles in a classic 14-minute match, and only Vince Russo's interference—clocking Low-Ki with a baseball bat—denied him the 10 pounds of gold. Just three nights later, Low-Ki endured perhaps the worst night of his career.

"Booker T winced in pain as he tried to put away Christian with a scissors kick, but he was unable to complete the move."

Christian won gold at a house show!



Low-Ki: bit too intense

It happened when he faced Dan Maff at a Ring of Honor show in Fairfield, Connecticut. At approximately the 15-minute mark, Low-Ki nailed Maff with a vicious kick to the back of the head, knocking him out cold. Low-Ki scored the easy three-count, but his primary concern was with his fellow competitor. As the referee leaned over Maff, ROH officials asked fans to temporarily evacuate the building.

Maff finally regained consciousness, to the relief of ROH's trainers. ROH cameraman Doug Gentry focused on Low-Ki as he slipped out of the ring, but a frustrated Low-Ki slapped him, compounding an already bad situation. An ambulance arrived to take Maff to the hospital, where it was determined that he had not suffered a concussion or any other serious injuries.

Later, Low-Ki issued an apology. "Outside the ring, I hit ROH cameraman Doug Gentry. I was so upset about what had just happened and was not in full control of my actions. I was out of line, and without sounding corny, I broke the code ... I only offer an apology, and wish there was a way for me to express just how sorry I am for my unprofessional display."

"The WCW creative director's rant was part of the show—meant for Hulk Hogan the wrestler, not Terry Bollea the person."

HULK HOGAN'S LAWSUIT AGAINST VINCE RUSSO THROWN OUT OF COURT

After years of legal wrangling, Hulk Hogan's lawsuit against Vince Russo finally came to a head on August 6. In the suit, Hogan claimed that Russo had defamed his character during WCW's Bash at the Beach 2000. Judge Forsling dismissed the charges against Russo, stating that the WCW creative director's rant was part of the show—meant for Hulk Hogan the wrestler, not Terry Bollea the person. She added that even if Russo had made his derogatory statements without Hogan's foreknowledge, there wasn't enough evidence to prove that to a jury.

In July 2000, Russo had sent WCW World champion Jeff Jarrett to the ring to lay down for Hogan at the Bash. And that's what Jarrett did: He literally laid down, a confused Hogan placed his foot on Jarrett's chest, and the referee made the three-count. Russo was conceding to the literal meaning of the creative control clause in Hogan's contract, but definitely did not

Sumie Sakai stymies Jigsaw
CHIKARA, August 16, 2003
Photo by Timothy A. Walker

You lose, "Hulkster"

honor it in spirit. Russo made the situation worse by launching into a tirade, live on pay-per-view, after Hogan and his son, Nicholas, had left the building.

"All day long, I'm playing politics with Hulk Hogan because tonight Hulk Hogan wants to play his creative control card," he said. "And to Hulk Hogan, that meant that tonight, in the middle of the ring, when he knew it was bulls___, he beats Jeff Jarrett!"

Concluding his 15-minute diatribe, Russo screeched, "Well, guess what! Hulk Hogan got his wish. Hogan got his belt and he went the hell home. And I promise everybody, or else I'll go in a goddamn grave, you will not see that piece of s___ again!" It did turn out to be Hogan's last match in WCW.

Judge Horsling did not rule out a possible action against AOL Time Warner, however.

JIM CORNETTE DEBUTS IN RING OF HONOR

Ohio Valley Wrestling promoter Jim Cornette caused quite a racket when Ring of Honor announced that he would be the next big name to appear in the fledgling promotion. Dubbed "Night Of The Racket," the August 9 event in Dayton, Ohio, was designed to lure old-school fans and tease the idea that there might be a looming connection between ROH and OVW.

As it turned out, Cornette received a much better reception than Jeff Hardy had the month before. But fans still didn't know what kind of mischief Cornette planned on stirring. What allegiance would he make? It wasn't long after his appearance that Cornette made his intentions known.

The controversy began when Cornette entered the ring following a tag team scramble match, claiming those kinds of bouts were not true wrestling. Dunn and Marcos—an up-and-coming team from the New York indy circuit, most notably Buffalo Championship Wrestling—entered the ring and asked Cornette to manage them, claiming they were already on the track to greatness in ROH. Before Cornette could respond, members of The Prophecy—including Christopher Daniels, Dan Maff, and Allison Danger—brutally attacked Dunn and Marcos.

So what was Cornette's stand on the situation? He joined The Prophecy in beating down the young hopefuls, even getting

Cornette didn't exactly do the honorable thing

"Cornette received a much better reception than Jeff Hardy had the month before."

in a few shots with his tennis racket for good measure. Later, Dunn and Marcos vowed to go after Cornette if he ever appeared at a ROH venue again.

JOANIE LAURER FILES RESTRAINING ORDER AGAINST SEAN WALTMAN

Was this a relationship that was doomed to failure? That's what a lot of mutual friends of Sean Waltman (also known as Syxx-Pac) and Joanie Laurer (formerly known as Chyna) believed when the two revealed their relationship on Fox's *Best Damn Sports Show Period* and became engaged on November 1, 2002. Why would the quiet and surprisingly gentle Laurer, who had already stated a preference for muscular men, choose the lanky and hotheaded Waltman, and why would Waltman choose a dominant female like Laurer?

In August, it became clear that the couple's long history, dating back to their days in DeGeneration X, probably wouldn't be enough to salvage their relationship. According to the syndicated television program *Celebrity Justice,* the engagement between Waltman and Laurer was officially off ... and Laurer had placed a restraining order against Waltman. Laurer accused Waltman of physical abuse, and claimed she suffered a black eye and bruises on her back. She also alleged that Waltman had threatened suicide and had a drug problem. As of August, the former WWE Intercontinental and women's champion was reportedly in hiding.

Waltman posted a long, rambling response on the Internet, claiming his actions were in self-defense against the Amazon, who stood a full four inches taller than him. Wrote Waltman: "I only used holds to restrain her from hurting me."

Prior to their engagement, Waltman had gone through a difficult divorce and Laurer had ended her relationship with 'N Sync member Joey Fatone.

IN OTHER NEWS

Brock Lesnar turned against WWE Smackdown champion Kurt Angle and formed an alliance with Vince McMahon ... Zach Gowen suffered leg injuries at the result of a vicious attack by Lesnar ... Mark Henry returned to WWE under the guidance of Theodore Long ... Rob Conway joined La Resistance ... Kevin Nash lost only a few of his famous locks after Chris Jericho beat him in special hair vs. hair match on *Raw* ... Kane beat former partner Rob Van Dam at SummerSlam, and The Undertaker pinned A-Train at the same event ... A.J. Styles and The Amazing Red were forced to vacate the Ring of Honor tag team title when it was determined that Red would miss several months due to a knee injury ... Sabu attacked Raven during his match against Jeff Jarrett in Buffalo, New York ... Empire State Wrestling star Tommy Caliber lost a thrilling scientific match to Mastiff before leaving to join the U.S. Navy ... Roddy Piper was slated to appear in an action movie called *Code Black,* starring Erik Estrada and directed by William Shatner ... Long-time wrestling writer and radio show host Ray Whebbe died of heart complications at the age of 48.

"Why would the quiet and surprisingly gentle Laurer, who had already stated a preference for muscular men, choose the lanky and hotheaded Waltman?"

We didn't think it would last

CONGRATS TO
JOANIE & SYXX-PAC
Wrestling relationships always work out so well!
The engagement of Joanie Laurer and Sean Waltman was quite a surprise. What do these two see in each other? More importantly, can their relationship survive?
By Harry Burkett

Smile, Linda, it's good news

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH
WWE TURNS A PROFIT AFTER TWO NEGATIVE QUARTERS

A profit of only $2.7-million isn't a lot of money as far as the McMahons are concerned, but it was pleasant news nonetheless, coming off two negative quarters that had investors questioning the creative direction of WWE. The McMahons were especially happy that their riskiest creative concept, the brand extension, was proving to be a success.

Higher-than-expected buy rates for both Judgment Day and Bad Blood helped to put WWE in the black for its second fiscal quarter of 2003. Bad Blood, in particular, was good news because it was WWE's first brand-exclusive pay-per-view. Judging by the numbers, fans were not turned off because it featured only Raw superstars.

The $2.7-million figure was even more impressive considering that Vengeance—traditionally in the second quarter—would fall into the third quarter this year. That caused gross revenue to drop from $85.4-million to $74.7-million, compared to the same quarter in 2002, although budget cutbacks helped WWE produce a profit anyway.

"Our cost-cutting measures initiated in 2003 produced better profitability than we planned," noted CEO Linda McMahon. "I am also excited that our first Raw and Smackdown separately branded pay-per-view events were well-received."

Linda also stated that she expected WWE's EBITDA (earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amorization) for fiscal 2004 to fall between $42.5-million and $47.5-million, an increase of $2.5-million.

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH
EDDIE GUERRERO

When Eddie Guerrero beat Chris Benoit to become the first *WWE* United States champion at Vengeance, he cemented his reputation among other great titleholders, including Ric Flair, Roddy Piper, Wahoo McDaniel, Magnum T.A., Dusty Rhodes, Kensuke Sasaki, and Bret Hart. In August, Guerrero sought to prove that his win was not a fluke and that he truly was a better wrestler than Benoit.

Guerrero's opportunity came at SummerSlam when, against the odds, he had to defend the U.S. title in a four-way match also involving Benoit and former champs Rhyno and Tajiri. When Guerrero entered the arena in his multicolored low-rider, the crowd in Phoenix gave him a standing ovation. The fans' embrace of Guerrero, despite the fact that he had brutalized Tajiri only a couple of months earlier, seemed to go against all logic. But Guerrero's popularity was genuine, judging from the unconditional cheers he had heard on Smackdown shows in recent weeks and again at SummerSlam.

"Latino Heat" on fire!

The U.S. champion was also impressive in the four-way match. He trapped Tajiri in the lasso as Benoit snared Rhyno in the crossface. When Tajiri reached the ropes to force a break, Guerrero immediately saved Rhyno—and his own title—by hitting Benoit. Rhyno showed his appreciation by attempting to gore Guerrero, who held his title belt over his midsection, knocking out Rhyno. Eventually, Benoit and Tajiri became embroiled in a slugfest and fell over the top rope, allowing Guerrero to land on Rhyno with the frog splash and retain his title. He didn't even have to lie, cheat, or steal.

Orlando Jordan headlocks Matt Hardy
***Smackdown*, August 12, 2003**
Photo by James McAfee

MATCH OF THE MONTH: MICHAEL SHANE VS. FRANKIE KAZARIAN VS. CHRIS SABIN, THREE-WAY "ULTIMATE X" MATCH

For NWA-TNA's X division to maintain its reputation as being innovative, the pressure is always on to try something original. Sometimes that attempt is met with failure. In the case of the "Ultimate X" match, TNA succeeded far beyond expectations.

It was basically a three-way ladder match, with one treacherous bonus: The X title belt would be hung on two long cables, forming an X, high above the ring. It was the closest that pro wrestling had come to pure stuntwork.

Chris Sabin, Frankie Kazarian, and Michael Shane were up to the task. They shimmied along the cables like old stunt pros, with the first high-risk move occurring when Kazarian readied Sabin for an electric chair drop, but Sabin—while still in a vulnerable position—caught Shane with a huracanrana ... and all three men crashed to the canvas.

Sabin wrestled especially desperately. He used a springboard dropkick to knock Kazarian and Shane off the cables again. He then gave Kazarian a swinging neckbreaker onto a chair. When a bloody Shane made it back to the cables, Sabin power-bombed him back down the ring below. The title belt actually fell off the cables twice, and officials had to scramble to reattach it. Nevertheless, Shane pulled himself along the cables toward the belt as Sabin and Kazarian battled a few feet away. Shane grabbed the belt and was declared the winner.

Shane: "Ultimate" X champ

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH: VINCE McMAHON HITS THE GONG

The Gong Show was a program airing in the 1970s and early-1980s that was basically an oddball talent competition, complete with a panel of celebrity judges who would hit a gong when the act was too hideous to bear. On August 31, during a live event in Uniondale, New York, Rhyno and Tajiri got a sense of what it must have been like to appear on that goofy game show.

In this case, the celebrity judge was Vince McMahon. Rhyno and Tajiri had been employing mat-based styles during their match, which, by this time, had lasted several minutes. Apparently, agents had advised Rhyno and Tajiri to wrestle a mat-based match instead of resorting to their usual high-impact fare. Rhyno and Tajiri believed it was part of the agents' overall effort to tone down the hard-hitting WWE product.

But both men had to wonder what was happening when the WWE chairman, who had been making regular appearances at house shows throughout the spring and summer in an attempt to boost attendance, suddenly power-walked to ringside. McMahon ordered Rhyno and Tajiri to get out of the ring because they were boring the fans. While there had been murmurs of "Bor-ing!" chants, Rhyno and Tajiri thought they were just doing what they were told. McMahon then summoned Smackdown's divas to put on a bikini contest.

Vince didn't care for this match

It was hard to explain McMahon's motivation. Did the agents and McMahon play a prank on Rhyno and Tajiri? Or were they punished simply for doing what they were told to do?

Either way, Rhyno and Tajiri were angry men after their boss' degrading stunt.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"Spike? Why are we talking about him? I picked him up at daycare the other day and kept an eye on him while his mom ran some errands. Cute kid."

—Christian, downplaying Spike Dudley's nearly successful bid for his Intercontinental title on *Raw,* "Press Conference," *PWI,* January 2004

"I still expected to be on the indies doing nothing too big yet. But I feel lucky that I've gotten to where I am now."

—Chris Sabin, confirming that he had surpassed his own expectations with his run as NWA-TNA X champ, "12 Questions," *PWI,* January 2004

"I think maybe I represent what Raven could have been. When he looks at me, he sees a younger version of himself. Only I'm avoiding all the pitfalls that tripped him up. Maybe he doesn't even consciously recognize it, but I think he hates me because I will be what he could have been."

—C.M. Punk, analyzing Raven's psyche, "Punked! The One Man Who Can Destroy Raven From The Inside Out," *The Wrestler,* January 2004

"See, this sport hasn't seen anything like us in a very long time—maybe since the mid-'90s when the Steiners dominated. Like them, we grew up cutting our teeth on amateur mats. We know how we were trained. Because of this, I know what Shelton's thinking and he knows what I'm thinking at all times."

—Charlie Haas, explaining why he and Shelton Benjamin had become such dominant Smackdown tag team champions, "Q & A," *The Wrestler,* January 2004

"For all his eye-watering brutality, Andy (the main character in *Tietam Brown*) almost comes across as a sensitive soul. In defiance of his father, he falls in love with a virginal cheerleader, holds hands on his first date, and fills up when Barry Manilow comes on the radio … Mostly, though, as in the ring, [Mick Foley] generates plenty of blood and tears, and the occasional laugh, but only the latter seems remotely for real."

—Tim Adams, offering an interesting depiction of *Tietam Brown* and author Mick Foley, *The Guardian*

"I love Joanie more than I thought possible. That love is unconditional. She could not grasp that concept, so she didn't believe it. But I do … I told her I would never given up on her."

—Sean Waltman, responding after it seemed that Joanie Laurer had given up on him, online statement

"I offer no excuses for my actions, as they were inexcusable … I hope in the future I will have the opportunity to be a better representative of the company and of this business."

—Low-Ki, apologizing for striking ROH cameraman Doug Gentry after unintentionally knocking out Dan Maff with a hard kick, online statement

"I had lunch with him that day. He was all business on the mat, but he was a down-to-earth and nice guy on a personal level."

—Brock Singleton, describing his encounter with Kurt Angle during training sessions at Clarion University in 1990, "Introducing," *The Wrestler,* January 2004

"I just want to say one more thing: I'm going to outlive all you people!"

—Vince McMahon, speaking at his birthday celebration held in the ring after cameras stopped rolling, SummerSlam

WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Kurt Angle: Beat Lesnar a second time
Brock Lesnar: Better than 499 other guys
Christian: His back was stronger than Booker's
Eddie Guerrero: Survived four-way at SummerSlam
Michael Shane: Gave the ultimate performance

LOSERS

Bill Goldberg: Humiliated again in WWE
Eric Bischoff: Couldn't score with Linda
Low-Ki: Stiff kicks, stiffer temper
Hulk Hogan: Vinny Ru was the wrong one to sue
Sean Waltman: Fared as well as Buttafuoco

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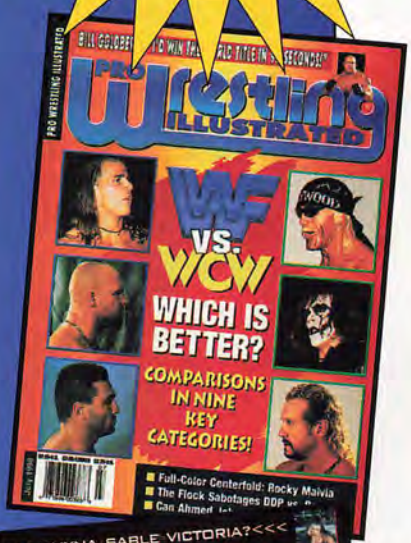

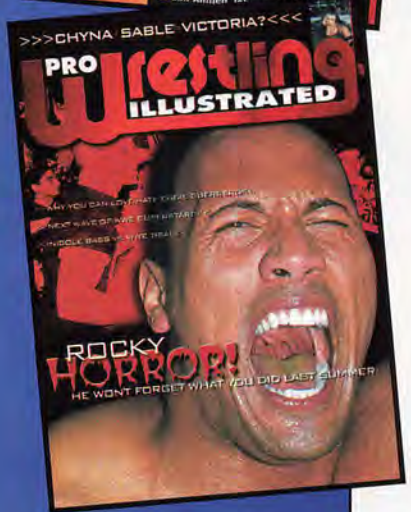

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I know it's a photo of me on holiday and yes, I know I'm naked in it... BUT DAMMIT, IT'S THE ONLY PHOTO I HAVE OF MYSELF WITHOUT MY MASK ON !!

ptember

WHY DID SEPTEMBER leave a sour taste? There were too many sad and somewhat pathetic stories, such as Roddy Piper returning to NWA-TNA and rambling so incoherently that Vince Russo actually made sense. Superstar Graham admitted that he made false allegations against WWE in the early-1990s. But were the allegations false? There were those who maintained that he was only trying to curry favor with Vince McMahon. The worst news involved the deaths of Anthony Durante, better known as Pit Bull II, and his girlfriend, and the children they left to fend for themselves.

Even the positive stories had negative connotations. Bill Goldberg finally won the WWE Raw title, but a plodding match and a predictable ending sapped some of his momentum. Brock Lesnar and Kurt Angle wrestled perhaps the greatest match of their careers, the 60-minute "Ironman" match on *Smackdown,* but Lesnar had to compete with a badly injured knee and Angle went forward in spite of the death of his sister just a day earlier. NWA-TNA's one-cent pay-per-view had to qualify as a positive story, right? Not necessarily, considering that TNA was resorting to practically giving its shows away.

Maybe that's being too negative. Nevertheless, the lackluster news items tended to cast a shadow over everything else. Unfortunately, we had no way of knowing that even more negative stories would make headlines the following month. In September, we should have appreciated the good news a little more.

BILL GOLDBERG DEFEATS TRIPLE-H FOR WWE RAW TITLE

WWE had hoped for a moment that equalled Bill Goldberg's win over Hulk Hogan for the WCW World title in 1998, but what they got was a pale imitation. "Da Man" finally triumphed over Triple-H to capture the WWE Raw championship, but it lacked the momentum, spontaneity, and the magic that accompanied Goldberg's historic title win five years earlier. Perhaps it fell flat because fans had already seen it before, from Goldberg's undefeated streak to the championship to the world title belt—a replica of the old WCW title strap—that he had worn before.

Goldberg made the best of a stale situation. Although he had been on hiatus for most of the past three years, his moves were coordinated and crisp inside the ring. If there was a knock against Goldberg in this match, it is that it went too long—and his limited repertoire of clotheslines, kicks, and some suplexes—made the match seem plodding at times. The crowd was unenthused as Triple-H worked over Goldberg's leg in the early going. Obviously, fans have an appetite for Goldberg's high-impact

Goldberg outplayed "The Game"

"Did The Rock pass the test? Based on the reviews, yes. Based on the numbers, he was moderately successful."

offense, but not much else.

The cheers for Goldberg became louder when he sent Triple-H hurtling over the top turnbuckle and to the arena floor. On the outside, he rammed the Raw champion's head into the ring steps. He even headbutted Triple-H, opening a cut on his forehead.

Nothing could stop Goldberg. A sledgehammer to the jaw merely staggered him. Goldberg quickly returned to the ring, followed by Triple-H. Goldberg speared Triple-H and planted him with the jackhammer. "Da Man" then scored the pinfall and was awarded the Raw title.

THE RUNDOWN OPENS IN THEATERS

The Rock established himself as arguably Hollywood's top new action star with the release of his latest movie, *The Rundown,* which opened nationwide on September 26. Although it was advertised as nothing more than a clever action-adventure flick, critics generally accepted it on that premise, often describing it as great fun and well worth the price of a ticket. *Ebert & Roeper At The Movies* show offered two enthusiastic thumbs up, and even the most critical of the online movie review sites endorsed the movie.

Rock: great reviews, pretty good box office

The Rundown was considered The Rock's biggest test to date. While The Rock has received good reviews for all of his work so far, he appeared in *The Mummy II* for less than five minutes, and his first starring role, in *The Scorpion King,* was still based on the successful *Mummy* franchise. *The Rundown* didn't necessarily have a built-in audience, other than wrestling fans.

Did The Rock pass the test? Based on the reviews, yes. Based on the numbers, he was moderately successful. *The Rundown* did become the number-one movie in the United States during its opening weekend, grossing nearly $20-million. Its nearest rival, *Under The Tuscan Sun,* generated only half that amount. But *The Rundown* didn't stay in the top spot for long, and didn't earn as much money as expected, considering the big budget advertising and positive reviews. Still, The Rock was considered the top candidate for the lead role in *Predator 3,* replacing Arnold Schwarzenegger (who had a cameo in *The Rundown*).

The Rock's co-stars in *The Rundown* included Sean William Scott of *American Pie* fame and veteran actor Christopher Walken.

CHRIS SABIN EMERGES VICTORIOUS IN SUPER X TOURNAMENT

On September 3, NWA-TNA presented an eight-man tournament that officials hoped would become an annual event, and, if the success of the first tourney is any indication, it is likely to return in 2004. It was an X division tournament with international flair, as some of the most talented cruiserweights in the world gathered at the Fairgrounds Coliseum. Some in attendance claimed that it might have even surpassed the ECWA's Super 8 and Jersey Championship Wrestling's J-Cup.

To make it even more interesting, TNA regulars comprised the U.S. bracket, while international stars comprised the other. Former WCW cruiserweight champion Juventud Guerrera, representing Mexico, beat Japan's Nosawa in the opening bout, followed by Canada's Teddy Hart beating Europe's Johnny Storm. In the U.S. bracket, Chris Sabin beat former ECW World champion Jerry Lynn, and Frankie Kazarian scored a win over X champion Michael Shane.

The semifinal matches tended to run longer than in the opening round. Teddy Hart impressed fans with his high-flying tactics, reminding many of Owen Hart at times, but fell victim to Juventud Guerrera's Death Valley driver. Chris Sabin beat his old rival Frankie Kazarian to advance to the tournament final.

Sabin was simply X-cellent

> **"Kane's appetite for destruction was greater than ever, and he was going to take out his frustrations on the company's heir apparent, Shane McMahon."**

Not surprisingly, Sabin and Guerrera provided the best match of the tourney. It ended with Sabin gaining a clean pinfall over the veteran Luchador. That win virtually guaranteed that Sabin would get a chance to regain the X title from Michael Shane in the near future.

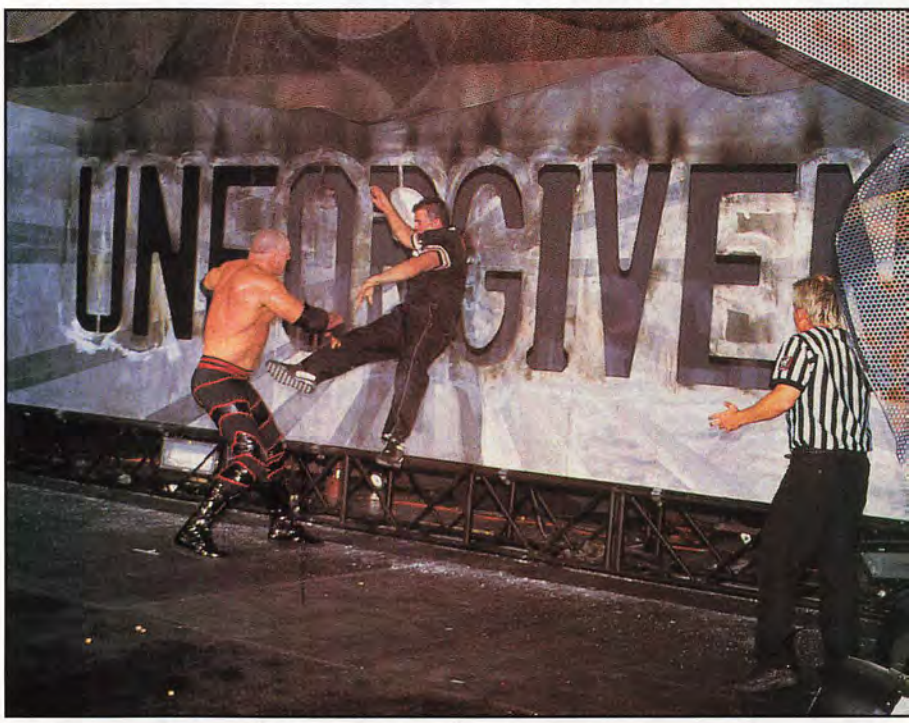
KANE LEFT STANDING AFTER MATCH WITH SHANE McMAHON

Unforgiven was made for Kane—quite literally. One month after The Undertaker defeated Kane at WrestleMania XIV, the two half-brothers had a return bout at the next pay-per-view, dubbed Unforgiven. The Undertaker burned Kane to hell in the WWF's first-ever inferno match. At Unforgiven 2003, Kane's appetite for destruction was greater than ever, and he was going to take out his frustrations on the company's heir apparent, Shane McMahon.

The younger McMahon had plenty of motivation. Kane had given his mother, Linda McMahon, a tombstone piledriver on the entrance ramp. He then went on a rampage, leaving a trail of broken Raw superstars in his wake. Shane was obviously going to employ the same strategy he used against The Big Show a couple of years ago, a bob-and-weave, hit-and-run offense.

Except this time, Shane wasn't asking, "Which way did he go?" Every time Shane looked up during Unforgiven, Kane was there, ready to inflict more punishment. But Kane had good reason to beat Shane into submission. It was a last-man-standing match, and simply pinning Shane wouldn't be good enough.

Shane wasn't standing at the end



"While promoting his new autobiography, *In The Pit With Piper,* 'Hot Rod' had blamed Russo for Owen Hart's death in 1999."

When Shane ran across the ring to dropkick a set of ring stairs into Kane's face, it became clear that he could beat "The Big Red Machine" in a last-man-standing match, just as Chris Jericho had done in 2000.

It didn't happen on this night, however. Shane went for it all, delivering a senton bomb from 20 feet high on top of the Unforgiven set, but he missed Kane entirely. With Shane unable to reach his feet before a count of 10, Kane was declared the winner.

DUDLEY BOYZ WIN UNPRECEDENTED 17TH TAG TEAM TITLE

When The Legion of Doom completed the trifecta in 1991, capturing the AWA, NWA, and, finally, the WWF world tag team championships, the wrestling industry hailed Animal and Hawk as the greatest duo of all-time. So where was the celebration when The Dudley Boyz won yet another world tag team championship, their 17th, at Unforgiven? Other than a few comments from announcer Jim Ross at Unforgiven and the following night on *Raw,* The Dudley Boyz weren't given much fanfare. Admittedly, Buh Buh Ray and D-Von Dudley shattered the record long ago, but, even then, it wasn't hailed as a historic moment.

What was that again, Roddy?

The Dudley Boyz beat La Resistance for the WWE Raw tag team title in a handicap tables match at Unforgiven. Spike Dudley was injured and unable to join his half-brothers, who, against the odds, Buh Buh and D-Von faced three men: Raw tag champs Rene Dupree and Sylvan Grenier, plus their American sympathizer, Rob Conway. The rules of the match were that the Dudleys had to put all three members of La Resistance through tables, while La Resistance had to put both of the Dudleys through tables. Fittingly, D-Von nailed Dupree with their French flagpole and helped Buh Buh Ray execute the 3D through a table on him for the victory. The fans cheered for the popular Dudleys, but the significance of the moment was probably lost on them.

For the record, The Dudley Boyz have now won eight ECW World tag team titles, one WCW World tag team title, five WWF World tag team titles, and three Raw tag team titles.

RODDY PIPER RETURNS TO NWA-TNA

Three months after WWE released him for making controversial statements on HBO's *Real Sports,* Roddy Piper appeared on NWA-TNA's September 17. Piper's comments were rambling, bordering on the nonsensical. And, in this appearance at least, his diatribe was more disturbing than entertaining. Piper blasted Internet writers for discussing his drug problems, although he had admitted to them on *Real Sports,* and said he was embarrassed that his son had to hear about it in school. He didn't specifically mention his release from WWE.

Piper stated that he was "as real as it gets," and once again complained about pro wrestling depending too much on sports entertainment. That's when the king of sports entertainment, Vince Russo, emerged to confront Piper. "You ripped my heart out last time you were here by talking about something I knew nothing about," raged Russo.

Apparently, Russo was referring to Piper's last controversial appearance in December 2002. While promoting his new autobiography, *In The Pit With Piper,* "Hot Rod" had blamed Russo for Owen Hart's death in 1999. He held Russo responsible for Hart being in the rafters and performing a stunt—instead of simply competing in the ring—that night.

"You are here tonight because you burned every bridge and nobody wants you," Russo told Piper, advising him to leave TNA. Later, Jeff Jarrett told the television audience that he would rather that Russo leave instead of Piper, indicating that "The Rowdy One" might return to TNA at least for special appearances.

Matt Hardy contorts Eddie Guerrero
***Smackdown*, September 30, 2003**
Photo by Gary Dineen/Winning Image

"The Game' had been quietly exploring his options in Hollywood for at least a couple of years."

TRIPLE-H SLATED FOR TWO MOVIE PROJECTS

In a career development that would certainly affect the Raw brand in late-2003 and early-2004, Triple-H confirmed that he would be launching his movie career in the very near future. But the news actually broke in *The Hollywood Reporter,* which claimed that Triple-H had landed a villainous role in *Blade: Trinity.* Directed by David Goyer, the film would be the third in a series about the adventures of a vampire hunter.

Even more intriguing was Triple-H's involvement in WWE Films' first production, *Jornada Del Muerte* (*Journey Of Death*). Bankrolled by WWE, the movie would be set in the American Southwest and the plot would involve motorcycle gangs and drug trafficking and have the feel of a modern-day Western. John Milius, who wrote the screenplay for the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now,* wrote the script for *Jornada Del Muerte* fully aware that Triple-H would be in the lead role.

While it seemed that Triple-H would simply taking his rivalry with The Rock from the wrestling ring to the silver screen, "The Game" had been quietly exploring his options in Hollywood for at least a couple of years. Triple-H had traveled to Hollywood with Stephanie McMahon in the fall of 2002 to audition for a part in live action/animated Looney Tunes movie *Back In Action.* Ironically, Triple-H lost that role to Bill Goldberg.

Now they're box office rivals, too?

PIT BULL II DIES OF DRUG OVERDOSE

Anthony Durante (professionally known as Pit Bull II) and his girlfriend, Dianna Hulsey, were found dead on their living room floor on September 25. Durante's stepfather had become concerned about Durante and discovered the bodies—laying face up and near each other—upon entering the house, located in Misquamicut, Rhode Island. According to Providence's WJAR-TV, the victims had needle marks on their bodies and OxyContin, a painkiller often abused as a recreational drug, was found in the home.

Even more tragic, the couple's 21-month-old son and eight-month-old daughter were alone in the house with the bodies for several days. The boy had left a trail of food from room to room—including a spilled quart of milk, chicken nuggets, and bits of bread, some or all of which he took out of the refrigerator. The baby girl was dehydrated, but was found safe in her crib. The Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families took custody of the boy and girl. Later, autopsies revealed that Durante had died of an overdose of OxyContin, while Hulsey died of an overdose of OxyContin combined with alcohol.

Durante had a criminal history in Pennsylvania and New York. In 1998, he and Gary Wolf (Pit Bull I) were placed on three years probation for selling steroids and marijuana. They were fined $2,000

Pit Bull II vs. Shane Douglas (1997)

> **"Mitchell wasn't as handy with hair clippers as he was with throwing fire. He kept digging the clippers into Raven's scalp, creating a bloody mess."**

each and ordered to return the $7,600 they grossed from the drug sales.

The Pit Bulls competed in ECW during what many consider its heyday, along with teams such as Public Enemy and The Eliminators. They won one ECW tag team title, and Pit Bull II was a former TV champion. They were also involved in a memorable feud in which Shane Douglas broke the neck of Pit Bull I.

JIM MITCHELL SCALPS RAVEN

After several weeks of interfering in Raven's matches, Shane Douglas finally got his wish: a one-on-one match against his former ECW rival. To make matters even more interesting, their September 17 encounter on NWA-TNA pay-per-view would be a hair vs. hair affair.

Raven and Douglas were bloody by the 10-minute mark. Douglas tried to weaken Raven with abdominal stretches, but Raven summoned the strength to give Douglas a mighty hiptoss over the top rope. When Douglas returned to the ring, he threw up on the mat. The blood and vomit must have brought back vivid memories for ECW fans.

Then, as is typical in TNA, the match was plagued by outside interference. Slash and Sinn, from Jim Mitchell's New Church, helped Douglas triple-team Raven. Fortunately for Raven, C.M. Punk and Julio Dinero chased off The New Church. Grabbing Douglas on the top turnbuckle, Raven spiked "The Franchise" with a DDT through a table in the ring. Just as the referee was about to slap the mat a third time, however, the lights went out.

When the lights came back on, a mystery man was attacking Raven. He unmasked, revealing Vampiro underneath. Douglas was able to score the pinfall thanks to Vampiro's interference ... but the brutality was just beginning.

Jim Mitchell wanted the hair-shaving honors. Mitchell wasn't as handy with hair clippers as he was with throwing fire. He kept digging the clippers into Raven's scalp, creating a bloody mess. Later, after the cameras had been turned off, an angry Raven confronted Mitchell in the backstage area.

Mitchell is no barber

Graham made amends with Vince

SUPERSTAR GRAHAM APPEARS ON *CONFIDENTIAL*

Was it an example of redemption or hypocrisy? Was he lying then or is he lying now? Those were the questions that many people were asking when "Superstar" Billy Graham appeared on the September 13 edition of *Confidential.* The three-part series focused primarily on Graham's health problems stemming from steroid use and hepatitis C. But the juiciest bit involved Graham's sensational allegations against Vince McMahon and the WWF a decade ago.

At the time, Graham appeared alongside Bruno Sammartino on *Donahue,* stating that Vince McMahon encouraged wrestlers to abuse steroids. He testified against McMahon and Dr. George Zahorian during the infamous steroid trials of the early-1990s. Graham was a sympathetic and heroic figure amidst the scandal, a man who had lost all his money and his amazing body, but was still bold enough to speak the truth.

"The ex-WWWF champion said he accused Vince McMahon, Pat Patterson, and Hulk Hogan of wrongdoing, although he had no direct knowledge."

Actually, Graham began changing his story in recent years. A born-again Christian, Graham said it was necessary to set the record straight. The ex-WWWF champion said he accused Vince McMahon, Pat Patterson, and Hulk Hogan of wrongdoing, although he had no direct knowledge. Skeptics charged that Graham, financially desperate and seeking some of his former glory, as well as some publicity for his soon-to-be-released book, was willing to say anything to return to WWE's good graces. After all, WWE had full control of his legacy.

"Vince McMahon never suggested or implied once about taking any kind of drug," confessed Graham on *Confidential.*

In the same piece, McMahon said, "Superstar is a bit of a con man." But in this case, who was conning whom?

IN OTHER NEWS

NWA-TNA began airing a 30-minute pregame show for its weekly pay-per-views on In Demand ... Kim Neilson (a.k.a. Desire) began training in the ring after suffering a fractured tailbone and a broken L1 disk in her back earlier in the year ... Alexis Laree entered WWE's developmental program in OVW ... The Honky Tonk Man enjoyed a one-day reign as Border City Wrestling champion ... Kevin Nash was tabbed to appear in *The Punisher,* a live action movie about the Marvel Comics superhero ... Bradshaw went on a media tour to publicize his new book, *Have More Money Now: A Common Sense Approach To Financial Management* ... The Iwate Prefectural Assembly ordered The Great Sasuke to begin presenting an ID pass depicting his bare face before entering the hall, although no one explained why that would make sense, since Sasuke was still allowed to wear his mask ... Tajiri beat Rey Misterio Jr. for the WWE cruiserweight title ... Rob Van Dam defeated Christian for the Intercontinental belt in a ladder match ... Los Guerreros won the Smackdown tag team championship from Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas ... Toshiaki Kawada won a tournament for the vacant All-Japan Triple Crown ... Trent Acid and Johnny Kashmere emerged victorious in a gauntlet series for the Ring of Honor tag team title.

Jimmy Vegas snapmares Eric Angle
International Wrestling Cartel, September 13, 2003
Photo by Timothy A. Walker

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH
NWA-TNA OFFERS ONE-CENT PAY-PER-VIEW

'Pac vs. Jarrett and more for a penny!

What was the best way to encourage fans to sample NWA-TNA? Since cable operators hadn't been very effective in advertising the promotion's weekly events, and because it still lacked a national TV contract, TNA came upon yet another innovative idea: a one-cent pay-per-view. For the September 10 pay-per-view, TNA dropped the price by $9.94 and aired a compilation of the greatest matches in the company's 15-month history.

Among the memorable encounters were NWA champion A.J. Styles defending against D-Lo Brown, Jeff Jarrett and Sting vs. Styles and Syxx-Pac, Styles winning the NWA title in a three-way bout over defending champ Jarrett and Raven, Jarrett retaining the belt against Raven in a singles encounter, Chris Harris and James Storm defeating Christopher Daniels and Elix Skipper for the NWA tag team title, Michael Shane capturing the TNA X belt in the first-ever "Ultimate X" match that also featured Frankie Kazarian and defending champ Chris Sabin. Don West and Mike Tenay introduced each match, effectively whetting the appetites of potential TNA fans.

"Being based on a pay-per-view format, we always have to fight for exposure," TNA co-owner Jeff Jarrett later told *The Wrestler*. "So we wondered how we could get people to sample the product without anything coming out the viewers' hip pockets. So we decided we had to lower the price point. But how low can you get that price? Well, you can't charge zero on a pay-per-view format, so what's the next best thing? One penny."

Jarrett added that the one-cent PPV was a "tremendous success."

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: KURT ANGLE

Why was Kurt Angle named Wrestler of the Month? Angle has received this honor more than anyone else over the past four years,but this month, he *lost* the WWE Smackdown title to Brock Lesnar. And Lesnar had a rather inspirational story himself, going into their 60-minute "Ironman" match with a bad knee, which he had hurt in a match against Angle four days earlier at a house show in Richmond, Virginia.

What a pro Angle is

Angle had an even more inspirational story, however. Only one day before his "Ironman" match against Lesnar, he found out that his 43-year-old sister, Le'Anne, who had a history of heart problems, died of a heart attack. It was another crushing blow to Angle, who had already seen his father and other relatives die prematurely due to hereditary heart ailments. Angle once remarked that he thought it was natural for men to die while still in their 40s. He recently tackled the issue of angina in a public service announcement.

Unfortunately, Le'Anne's death didn't come as a huge surprise to Angle, because his sister had already suffered one heart attack in the spring of 2002. Angle decided to go through with his Smackdown title defense against Lesnar anyway. But by pointing skyward when he entered the arena, Angle showed that he hadn't forgotten about his big sister.

It's no coincidence that Angle frequently receives recognition as our Wrestler of the Month. In addition to athletic skill, it boils down to professionalism, moral character, and strength of will, three qualities that Angle has in abundance.

Brock Lesnar tries to F5 The Undertaker
***Smackdown*, September 30, 2003**
Photo by Gary Dineen/Winning Image

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The ironmen delivered!

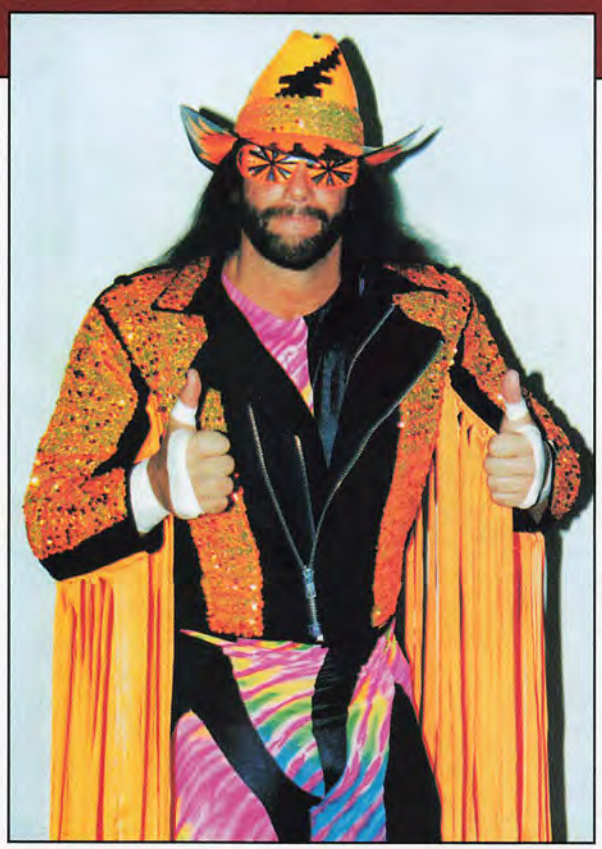
MATCH OF THE MONTH: BROCK LESNAR vs. KURT ANGLE, "IRONMAN" MATCH

Brock Lesnar shouldn't have been there. Kurt Angle shouldn't have been there. But both men arrived in Raleigh, North Carolina, to wrestle in WWE's first televised 60-minute "Ironman" match. The September 18 bout would air two days later on *Smackdown.* Angle, the Smackdown champion, had pinned Lesnar for the title in a three-way match at Vengeance and defeated him again at SummerSlam. So Lesnar desperately needed a victory.

After stalling during the opening minutes, Lesnar attacked Angle viciously with a steel chair. His strategy seemed absurd at first because it gave Angle a fall by disqualification. But Lesnar had succeeded in injuring Angle, and took advantage of his weakened state to score two pinfalls, one with an F5 and another with an anklelock.

Lesnar won a third fall in controversial fashion, giving Angle an F5 on the arena floor and causing the champion to be counted out at the 20-minute mark. The Olympian came back with an Angle slam out of nowhere, pinning Lesnar to make the score 3-2. Lesnar hit Angle with the Smackdown title belt to earn a fourth fall and, moments later, climbed to the top turnbuckle to heave Angle over with a superplex, making the score 5-2. Lesnar later appeared ready to attempt a shooting star press, which went painfully wrong at WrestleMania XIX, but Angle caught him with a belly-to-belly superplex to score a pinfall at the 50-minute mark. Then he used an anklelock to force Lesnar into submission.

With only five minutes left, Lesnar ran out the clock (he was trapped in an anklelock when time expired) until he was declared the winner, scoring five falls to Angle's four. Lesnar had regained the Smackdown championship in what would be voted Match of the Year by *PWI* readers.



Two thumbs down for Savage!

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH "MACHO MAN" SKIPS A BEAT

Randy Savage couldn't wait to launch his publicity tour to promote his new rap CD, *Be A Man.* One of his first stops was Treasure Island, Florida, where he would give a rare performance. Mr. B's Bar & Grill wasn't the classiest joint in town, but it was the most receptive to having the "Macho Man" as a featured performer. Unfortunately, Bubba the Love Sponge—a local disc jockey and long-time friend of Hulk Hogan—found out about Savage's upcoming date and prepared accordingly.

Bubba ridiculed Savage for several days leading to the big event. He handed out free T-shirts that read "Hulk Hogan Rules" and "Macho Man Sucks" to those fans willing to attend the show. When Savage and his bodyguard for the evening, Brian Adams, arrived at Mr. B's in a limousine, the boos and howls began immediately.

Savage didn't have any luck inside the bar and grill, either. Apparently, Savage attempted to pull a Milli Vanilli and lip-synch the songs, but the compact disc began to skip. The frustrated Savage, tired of the ridicule and no doubt very embarrassed, threw the microphone down on the stage. He summoned Adams and got the heck out of Mr. B's.

And Bubba's flunkies laughed at him as he left the building.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"Even though they were before our time, my brother and I have a lot of respect for the Briscos.

We learned first about them in the magazines and then searched for tapes of them in action, just because of the similarity with our names ... If we get compared favorably to Jack and Jerry, that's a great compliment. If we get ripped on because people think we're not as good as they were, that only makes us hungrier."

—Jay Briscoe, referring to the original Briscos, "20 Years Later ... Can The Briscoes Make Fans Forget About The Briscos?" *Inside Wrestling,* February 2004

"Why do you keep knockin' this guy? You knock him every time you get a chance."

—Chris Matthews, insinuating that Jesse Ventura's newfound criticisms of California gubernatorial candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger were rooted in jealousy, *Hardball*

"It's alienating new fans, and taking air time away from guys who could carry the company in a few years when wrestling becomes hot again. With Shane, he'll do whatever is asked of him, but I don't see him as someone who likes the spotlight. Stephanie seeks it out. I really believe she enjoys being Stephanie McMahon the TV character."

—Kevin Kelly, sharing some tidbits about the McMahon children following his seven-year tenure in WWE, *Get In The Ring* radio show

"Edge was the last guy to win a belt at a house show before me, and I've already beat his title reign. He only got to keep his title for one day. I was just excited when day two rolled around and I knew I beat his record."

—Christian, still comparing himself to Edge, ign.com

"Like any reality show, *Tough Enough* places a lot of emphasis on entertainment and personality, and that's fine. But you need more than charisma to make a real mark in this business. You need a head for the sport, dedication, and intelligence."

—Shaniqua, insisting that she has all of those qualities, "Hot-seat," *Inside Wrestling,* February 2004

"If I had gotten my hands around his throat, I'd have attempted to break his neck. No doubt at that time I would have loved the process, although it would have been too quick."

—Vince McMahon, describing his feelings toward Superstar Graham during the steroid scandal, *Confidential*

"The whole situation has been rocky. Whether I came here with the WCW stigma or whatever it may be—differences of opinion between myself and the office, the boys, or whatever—all that's in the past. It just took a little bit of time to iron all that stuff out."

—Bill Goldberg, assessing his work environment since signing with WWE, wwe.com

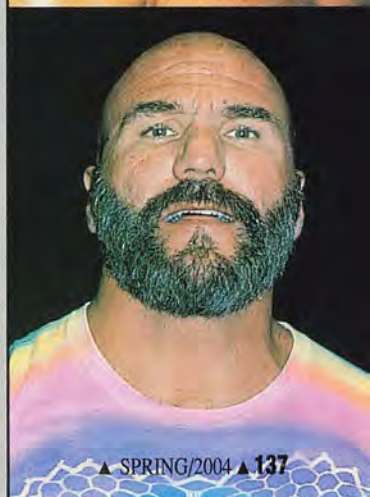
WINNERS & LOSERS

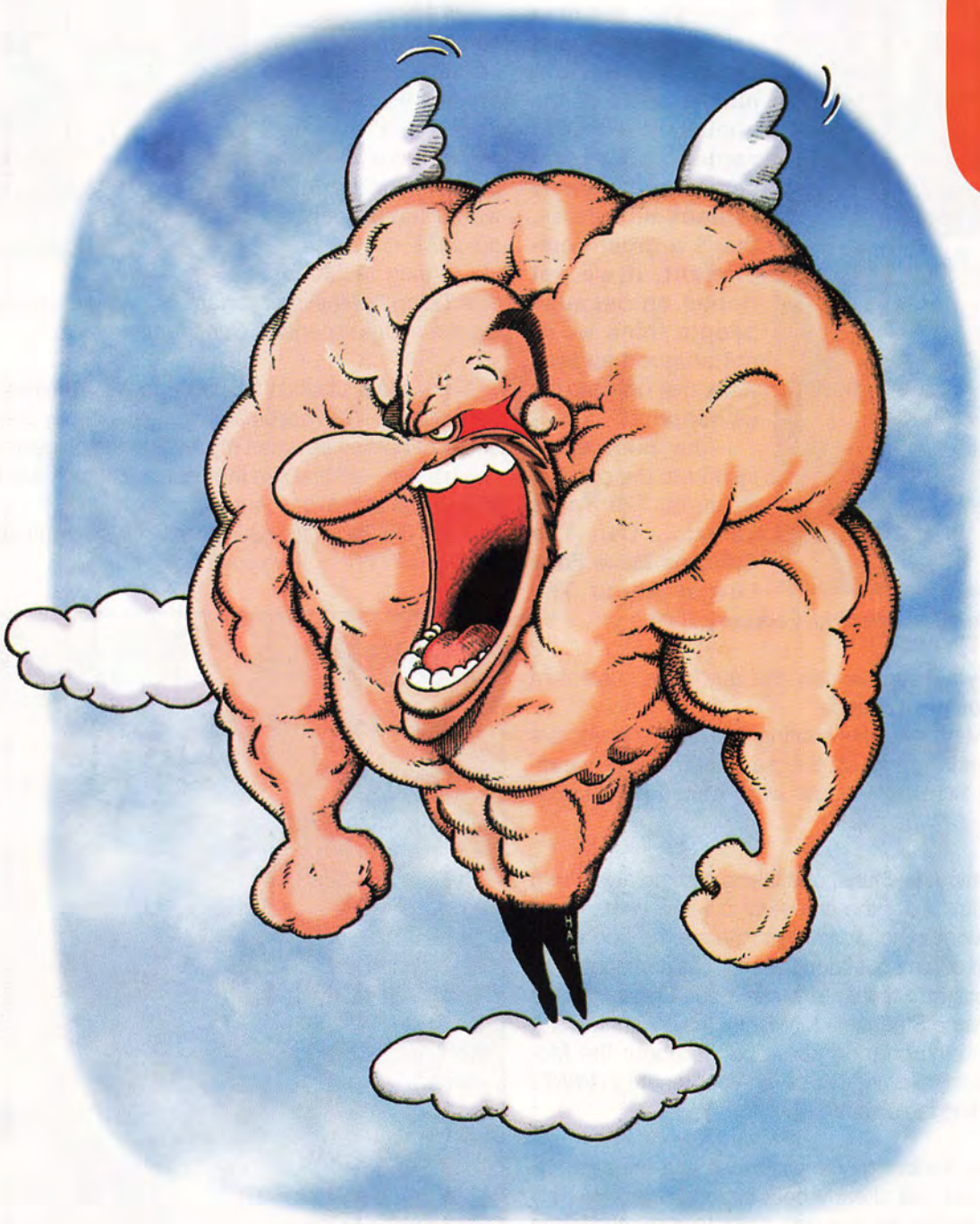
WINNERS

Bill Goldberg: Completed the long march
The Rock: Critics didn't run him down
Chris Sabin: Did an "X"-tra good job
The Dudley Boyz: 17 and counting
Kurt Angle: Loved his sister

LOSERS

Roddy Piper: "Hot Rod" rambled too much
Jim Mitchell: Stick to playing with matches
Superstar Graham: Legends could lie, too
La Resistance: Couldn't resist the Dudleys' onslaught
Randy Savage: Read our lips ... be a man!





MICHAEL HEGSTRAND 1957-2003 R-I-P

ctober

FEWER TRICK-OR-TREATERS were wearing "Stone-Cold," Rock, and Undertaker masks as they went from door to door this year, but October embodied why the industry remains so mesmerizing to true believers. The month had romance, politics, silliness, sorrow, and action—just the right mix of reality and unreality.

The fairy tale wedding of Triple-H and Stephanie McMahon epitomized that. There was no doubt that Mr. Levesque and Ms. McMahon had made a real love connection, but the ceremony took place in the fabled town of Sleepy Hollow inside a small church … with what seemed like a battle royal of WWE superstars quietly watching the proceedings. Why didn't Joanie Laurer refuse to hold her peace, show up at the church, and shove Steph into a giant gravy bowl? Somehow, it wouldn't have seemed out of place. Then there was the unreal performance of Michael Hayes, who traded his sense of class for a stupid angle straight from World Class.

Sadness was reserved for the families and friends of Road Warrior Hawk, who burned his life out too quickly, and Stu Hart, who stretched out his life to outlast two of his sons. There was sympathy for Alan Funk, whose career might have ended in one bone-shattering moment. And action? No Mercy provided that in abundance, with Stephanie losing an "I Quit" match to Vince before she told Hunter, "I do." And, in NWA-TNA, the action would have to wait, because the "Hulkster" wasn't coming through yet.

TRIPLE-H MARRIES STEPHANIE McMAHON

The McMahon-Helmsley era *truly* began on October 25 when Triple-H (whose real name is Paul Levesque) married Stephanie McMahon at St. Teresa of Avila Catholic Church in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Triple-H's father was the best man, and the ceremony was described as understated, yet classy.

Insiders viewed the marriage of Triple-H and Stephanie as a real power union. Triple-H was already influential in production meetings and creative discussions. His new status as Vince McMahon's son-

We wish them happiness!

"The 'Hulkster' underwent knee surgery on October 31, and physicians advised that he might not be able to compete for several months."

in-law would make his role even more significant. Triple-H could also become, potentially, the father of Vince's grandchildren, the fifth generation of the McMahon promoting empire. Triple-H was poised to remain a WWE powerbroker long after his days as an active wrestler are over. Although most acquaintances believed it was a marriage based on genuine love and commitment, the political dimensions were undeniable.

Triple-H and Stephanie had become well-acquainted during the storyline leading to the formation of the McMahon-Helmsley Era in 2000. Apparently, that angle brought Triple-H and Stephanie closer together, and their relationship had been blossoming ever since. They had been considered an item for the past couple of years.

Among those in attendance were Ric Flair, Arn Anderson, Steve Austin, Shawn Michaels, Kevin Nash, The Undertaker, Kurt Angle, William Regal, Fabulous Moolah, Mae Young, Mick Foley, Sgt. Slaughter, Arnold Skoaland, and Killer Kowalski.

Nearly 100 onlookers gathered near the church to see all the wrestling celebrities. State troopers and other police officers ensured the crowd remained at a safe distance and didn't get out of control.

HULK HOGAN POSTPONES TNA DEBUT DUE TO KNEE INJURY

The Jarretts and the owners of Panda Energy were certain that NWA-TNA had come upon its big breakthrough: Hulk Hogan had agreed to appear on a special three-hour, Sunday night pay-per-view, the company's most direct challenge to WWE so far. TNA hurriedly spread the word among cable operators, and the event—titled Bound For Glory—was scheduled for November 30.

On October 13, however, Hogan had another commitment in Japan, where he defeated former NWA champ Masa Chono in front of 35,000 fans at the Tokyo Dome. Because Hogan was the first man to hold the IWGP title 20 years earlier and had risen to unprecedented heights as WWF World champion during the 1980s, his win over Chono was considered an incredible moment. But leave it to Jeff Jarrett to spoil Hogan's victory. Jarrett made a surprise appearance at the postshow press conference and bashed Hogan over the head with his guitar. "I heard you were lookin' for TNA," taunted Jarrett. "Well, TNA just came to you!"

As it turned out, the match against Chono and the attack at the press conference aggravated knee injuries that had been plaguing Hogan for some time. The "Hulkster" underwent knee surgery on October 31, and physicians advised that he might not be able to compete for several months. TNA officials decided to postpone Bound For Glory until Hogan could participate.

Meanwhile, Jarrett continued his public tirades against Hogan, and even attacked his long-time confidant Jimmy Hart on a TNA pay-per-view.

Hogan tweaked his knee against Chono

ROAD WARRIOR HAWK DIES OF APPARENT HEART ATTACK

On October 19, Road Warrior Hawk (whose real name was Michael Hegstrand) was found dead at his home in Indian Shores, Florida. His wife, Dale, checked on him several hours

May Hawk rest in peace

after he had decided to lay down and realized Hawk wasn't breathing. It was assumed that the 46-year-old had died of a heart attack in his sleep.

Managed by "Precious" Paul Ellering, The Road Warriors were known for their painted faces, spiked shoulder pads, and sheer brutality. Hawk and his partner, Animal, burst upon the Georgia scene in 1983 and quickly became the National tag team champions.

The Warriors, also known as The Legion of Doom, became undeniably the top team in the industry after defeating Baron Von Raschke and The Crusher for the AWA World tag team title in 1984. But they probably made the most money while feuding with the Koloffs for Jim Crockett Promotions and during trips to the Orient, where they won the All-Japan International tag team championship. Their NWA World tag team title victory in 1988, and their capture of the WWF tag team belts in 1991, made them the only duo to win all three world tag team championships that existed at the time. Hawk and Animal won the WWF straps a second time in 1997.

Hawk teamed with Kensuke Sasaki to form The Hellraisers while Animal was sidelined with a back injury in the early- to mid-1990s. Together, they captured the IWGP International tag team title. Hawk's hard-living ways caught up with him, though, and he suffered a heart attack during a 2000 tour of Australia. He and Animal wrestled very briefly in both NWA-TNA and WWE during the past year. Most recently, he espoused the virtues of Christianity and clean living while touring with Ted DiBiase's ministry.

"Hawk's hard-living ways caught up with him, though, and he suffered a heart attack during a 2000 tour of Australia."

SMACKDOWN CHAMP LESNAR BEATS 'TAKER IN BIKER CHAIN MATCH

Ordinarily, someone like The Undertaker would be going through Vince McMahon to get a shot at the world champion. At No Mercy, however, it seemed as if The Undertaker was going through WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar in order to get a crack at Vinnie Mac. The Undertaker requested the specialty bout, a biker chain match. A steel chain hung from a corner pole and could be used as a weapon, but it would remain a conventional match in every other respect.

Unfortunately, as soon as The Undertaker had neutralized Lesnar and began climbing the turnbuckles, the lights went out. The confusion allowed Lesnar to catch a breather, but Undertaker regained the advantage and gave the champion a piledriver on the ring steps. Back inside the ring, "Big Evil" snared Lesnar in a series of submission holds. Lesnar responded with a power bomb. Undertaker survived Lesnar's F5 by putting his foot on the ropes.

When Lesnar climbed to the top turnbuckle, The Undertaker caught him with a choke-slam. He was going for the chain when The Full-

'Taker couldn't topple Lesnar

"For Jarrett to make his dream match come true, he had to take the NWA belt from A.J. Styles."

Blooded Italians ran into the ring. The Undertaker knocked down Nunzio, Chuck Palumbo, and Johnny Stamboli. After giving Lesnar the last ride, he dove over the top rope onto Palumbo and Stamboli. 'Taker did get the chain, but Vince McMahon arrived and shoved him into the ropes. That enabled Lesnar to grab the chain and knock out Undertaker with it. Lesnar scored the pinfall after 24 minutes of action.

This was the third pay-per-view meeting between Lesnar and Undertaker. In 2002, they battled to a no-contest at Unforgiven, and Lesnar beat Undertaker in a gory "Hell In A Cell" war at that year's No Mercy.

JEFF JARRETT BEATS A.J. STYLES FOR NWA TITLE

While negotiating a deal that would commit Hulk Hogan to NWA-TNA's first Sunday night pay-per-view, Jeff Jarrett realized that he had to provide three kinds of bait: money, revenge, and prestige. TNA investors came up with the money. Hogan vowed revenge after Jarrett bashed him with a guitar in Japan. And prestige? For those paying attention to his press conference in Tokyo, Hogan said he had two more goals in his career: to win his second IWGP title and his first NWA championship. So, for Jarrett to make his dream match come true, he had to take the NWA belt from A.J. Styles.

Jarrett was the man again

Jarrett struck at the October 22 pay-per-view, held at the Fairgrounds Coliseum in Nashville, where he faced Styles for the NWA heavyweight title. Considering that Jarrett had attacked Hogan's manager, Jimmy Hart, earlier in the show, fans did an about-face, booing Jarrett and cheering Styles. When Jarrett trapped the champion in the figure-four leglock, Styles' stooge, Sonny Siaki, tried to interfere. TNA official Erik Watts tried to help the referee gain control of the match, but Dusty Rhodes restored order by using the bionic elbow on Siaki and pulling him away from the ring with a bullrope.

To the fans' dismay, Jarrett used rulebreaking tactics to maintain his advantage and nailed Styles with the NWA title belt to score the tainted pinfall after 12 minutes of action. The victory marked the start of Jarrett's second reign as NWA champion.

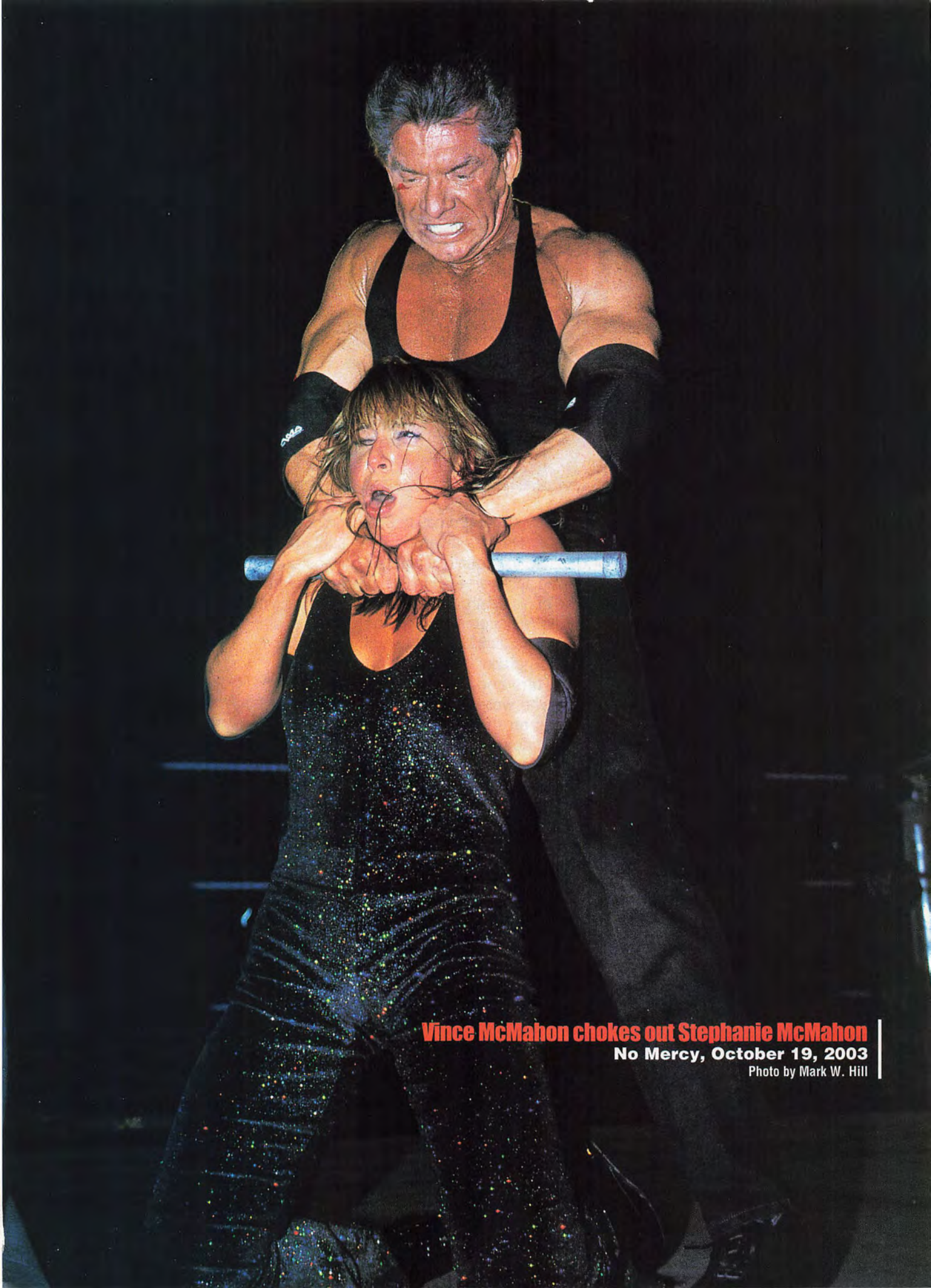
After the match, Jarrett stressed that he was the new champion, and that there was nothing that old-timers such as Hogan, Randy Savage, Sting, or Roddy Piper could do about it.

STU HART DIES AT 88

Wrestling's most famous patriarch, Stewart Edward Hart, died of complications from diabetes and pneumonia on October 16, nearly two years after his wife, Helen, had died. Hart had fallen down in his home and severely cut his arm, which led to a staph infection and an overall decline in his health. He spent two weeks at Rockyview General Hospital in Calgary, Alberta, until his death.

Hart was best remembered for transforming hungry up-and-comers, including his eight sons, into superbly trained mat-proficient wrestlers. While Bruce, Keith, and Ross Hart enjoyed success in their father's Stampede Wrestling promotion, Bret and Owen Hart went on to become main event stars in the WWF. While following the careers of his children, Stu Hart experienced the greatest of highs and the worst of lows, such as Bret's WWF and WCW world title reigns and Owen's fatal fall at a 1999 pay-per-view.

Born May 3, 1915, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Hart lived a rugged life, from surviving a harsh winter while living in a tent during his younger years to grinding it out with men half his age in his legendary basement Dungeon. After dominating Canada's amateur wrestling ranks, Hart established Stampede Wrestling in 1948, and was the driving force behind the mul-



Vince McMahon chokes out Stephanie McMahon
No Mercy, October 19, 2003
Photo by Mark W. Hill

Stu and Helen Hart in 1997

tiple incarnations of that promotion until the early-1990s. He was awarded the Order of Canada, the country's greatest honor for lifetime achievement, in 2001.

At the time of his death, Hart's legacy lived on with WWE superstars such as Chris Benoit, Chris Jericho, and Lance Storm, along with grandsons Teddy Hart and Harry Smith, who were making strides on the independent scene. Many famous stars, including Vince McMahon, attended his funeral.

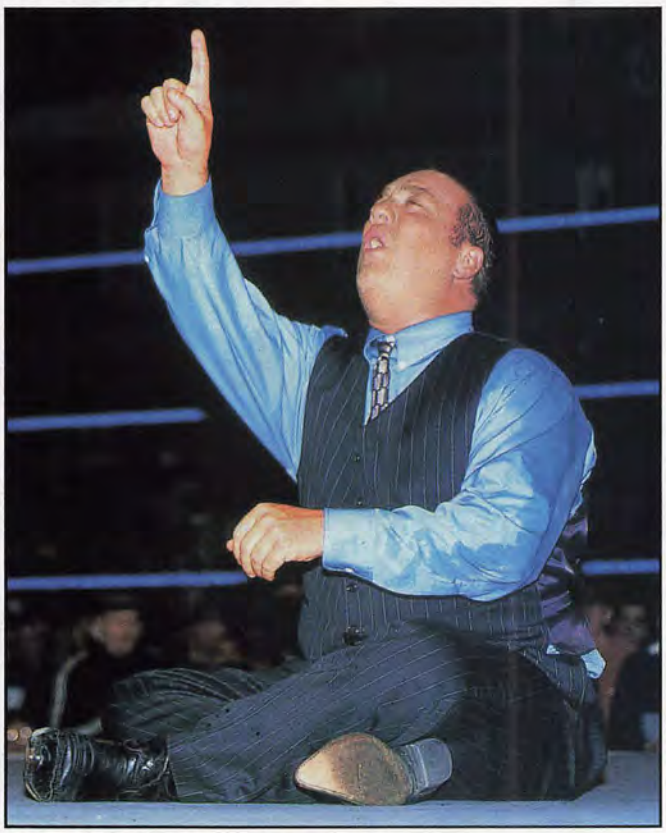
PAUL HEYMAN NAMED NEW SMACKDOWN GENERAL MANAGER

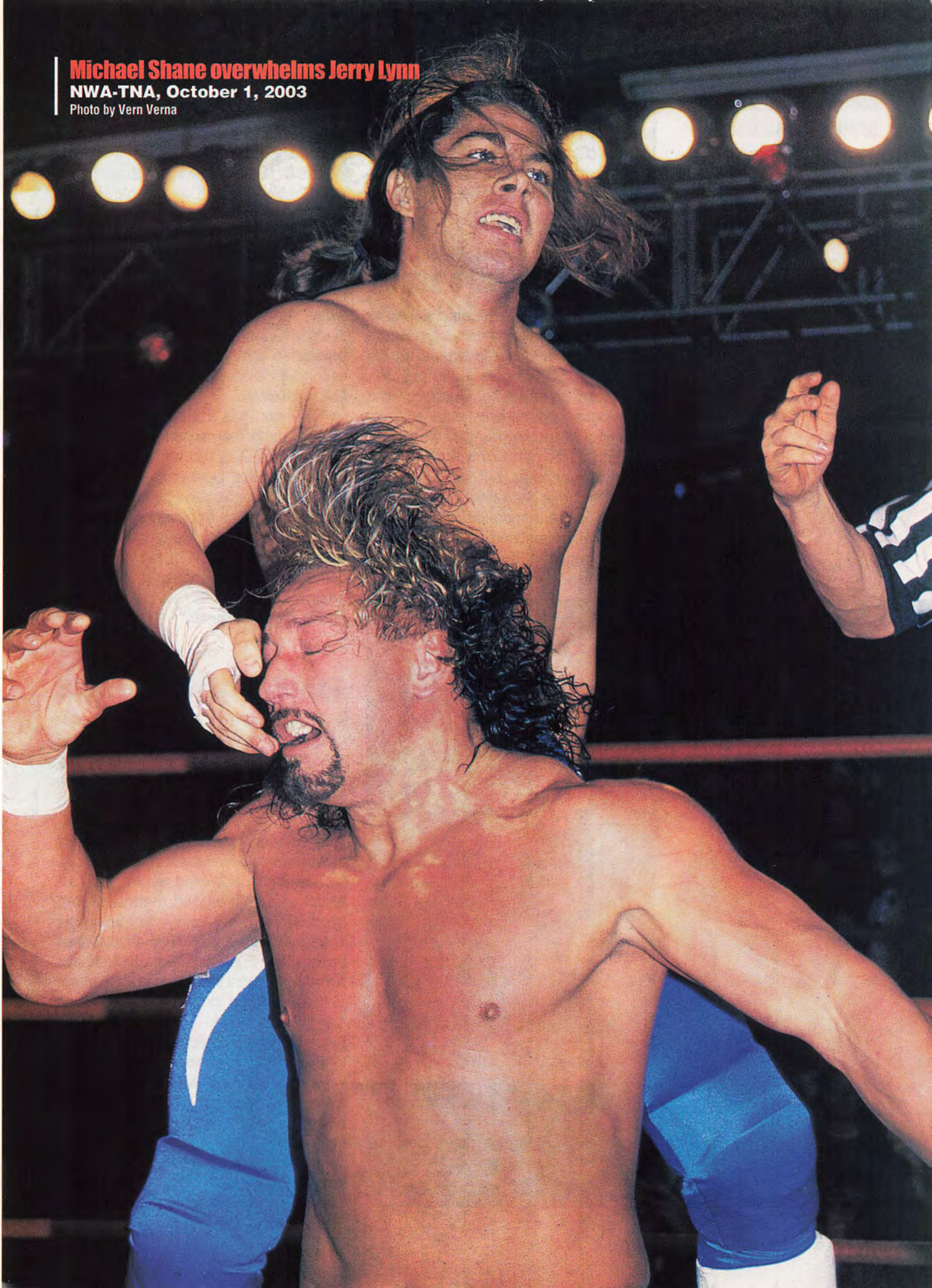
Appearing tan and considerably thinner, Paul Heyman bounded to the ring on October 21 with renewed energy after Vince McMahon introduced him as Smackdown's new general manager. Vince had beaten his daughter, Stephanie, in an "I Quit" match at No Mercy two days earlier, forcing her to quit as GM. To Vince, the former ECW owner was perfectly qualified for the on-air role. The WWE chairman welcomed Heyman with a hearty handshake.

Unfortunately for Heyman, McMahon's decision did not include returning him to power behind the scenes as Smackdown's head writer, a job he lost earlier in the year. But that didn't prevent Heyman from telling McMahon and the Smackdown audience, "Things will be changing around here." Like any corrupt wrestling executive, he began abusing his power immediately by targeting those individuals who had supposedly wronged him in the past. During his first night back on the program, Heyman revoked a tag team title shot from Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas, and intervened several times in an attempt to cost The Undertaker his handicap match against WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar and The Big Show.

"Like any corrupt wrestling executive, [Heyman] began abusing his power immediately by targeting those individuals who had supposedly wronged him in the past."

Vince gave Heyman one more chance





Michael Shane overwhelms Jerry Lynn
NWA-TNA, October 1, 2003
Photo by Vern Verna

"Big Show clasped Guerrero around the throat and unleashed another choke-slam to pin the second-generation star and become the U.S. champion."

Heyman had been expected to return in an on-air role after finally recovering from a neck injury he suffered at the hands of Lesnar a few months earlier. Insiders didn't expect Heyman's job to be very secure, considering that Stephanie would be returning from her honeymoon with Triple-H in a matter of weeks.

THE BIG SHOW PINS EDDIE GUERRERO FOR U.S. TITLE

On October 19, it became apparent that WWE had "no mercy" for Eddie Guerrero or the U.S. title when The Big Show captured the gold at the pay-per-view of the same name. Guerrero, who had experienced a spontaneous surge of popularity in recent months, went after The Big Show with one high-impact move after another, but was unable to wobble his huge challenger.

After Guerrero had exhausted most of his arsenal, he resorted to desperate tactics. He punched The Big Show with a set of brass knuckles and went for the cover, but the 485-pounder kicked out. Guerrero then nailed Show with his title belt and followed that with a frog splash, yet even that failed to keep the behemoth down for the count.

The Big Show retaliated with his trademark choke-slam. Guerrero barely had enough energy to put his foot over the rope. "Latino Heat" continued to fight dirty, belting Big Show with a low blow. Guerrero then spiked Show with a DDT, but even *that* wasn't enough to put him away. At the 11-minute mark, Big Show clasped Guerrero around the throat and unleashed another choke-slam to pin the second-generation star and become the U.S. champion.

The loss was a disappointment for those hoping that exciting things would happen with Guerrero and the U.S. title. Considering that Guerrero's U.S. title victory at Vengeance had been relegated to an opening match and that his encounter with Big Show at No Mercy played to his weaknesses instead of his strengths, some began to wonder what WWE had against Smackdown's new championship and hottest mid-carder.

Big Show cooled off "Latino Heat"

ALAN FUNK SUFFERS TRAUMATIC FACIAL INJURIES

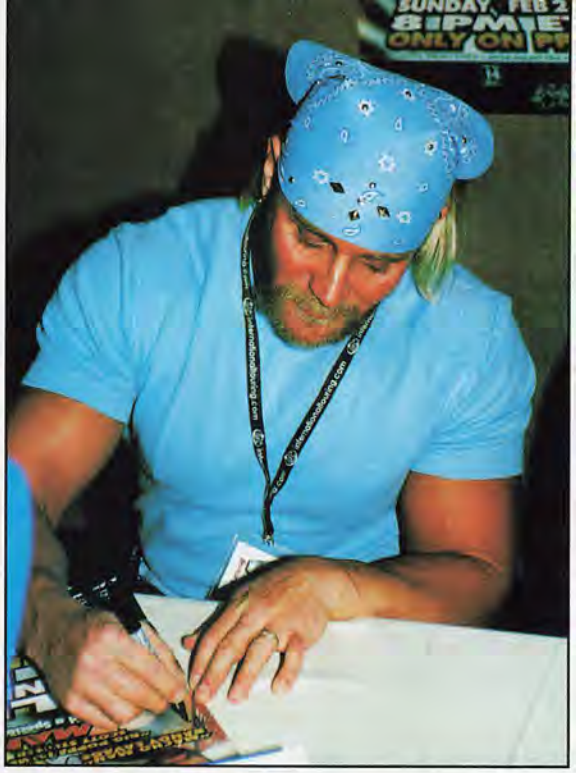
Tragedy struck Alan Funk, a mid-carder best known for his appearances in WCW and NWA-TNA, while the young star was on a tour of Europe. Funk was teaming with Elix Skipper against Mike Sanders and Sonny Siaki in Helsinki, Finland, when a ring mishap made it unlikely that he would ever wrestle again.

The injury occurred when Siaki attempted a split-legged moonsault but botched the move badly, slamming his knee into Funk's face. The effects were devastating: Funk suffered a broken jaw, a broken orbital bone, a broken nose, and a fractured skull. His eyeball was hanging out of its socket as he was helped to the backstage area.

Funk was rushed to the hospital, where physicians said he was lucky to be alive. They kept him in the hospital for quite a while until he was finally allowed to fly home.

Inside the wrestling business, Funk was considered a talented performer who was willing to do anything to entertain a

Ultimo Dragon ties up Rey Misterio Jr.
***Smackdown*, October 28, 2003**
Photo by Scott Cunningham



Funk: scary injuries

crowd. Funk experimented with flamboyant characters such as Kwee Wee in WCW and Bruce in TNA, where he often wrestled in drag against women. But his friends thought his impersonation of Hulk Hogan, as The Funkster, was the most hilarious. It was a far cry from his bland persona, competing simply as Alan Funk on *WCW Saturday Night* earlier in his career.

Although his career prospects seemed grim after the Helsinki match, there was hope that he could return to the ring someday, considering that Ed Leslie (Brutus Beefcake) had suffered equally gruesome injuries in a parasailing accident and made a successful comeback.

STEVE AUSTIN REVEALS *THE STONE COLD TRUTH*

The long-awaited autobiography of Steve Austin hit bookstores on October 28. Written with the help of Jim Ross and Dennis Brent, *The Stone Cold Truth* didn't cause much controversy, because Austin had already complained loudly about WWE's creative team and management just before his walkout in June 2002. Still, Austin's tell-mostly-all book included some tidbits never revealed before and discussed his approach to the wrestling business. If anything, though, his book was less controversial than some of his previous interviews on *Byte This!* and on wwe.com.

"[Austin] drank several energy drinks and a pot of coffee as the result of an anxiety attack, causing his heartbeat to reach as high as 180."

The first chapter was the most revealing. Austin recounted the night before WrestleMania XIX, when he drank several energy drinks and a pot of coffee as the result of an anxiety attack, causing his heartbeat to reach as high as 180. He was loaded onto a stretcher, carried out of the hotel where he was staying, and sent via ambulance to the hospital. He spent the night there, but went ahead with his match against The Rock the following day. Austin noted that losing to Rock was a fitting way to end his career.

Also in the book, Austin forgave Eric Bischoff for firing him from WCW, praised Vince McMahon for helping him with an IRS problem early in his WWE career, criticized Owen Hart for not taking responsibility for injuring his neck, and ignored Vince Russo.

WWE had wanted to release an Austin autobiography when pro wrestling was so popular a few years ago, but "Stone-Cold" didn't make the time to complete the project until the end of his active career.

IN OTHER NEWS

Afa Anoai Jr., who became a standout in high school football and a hot prospect for a wrestling career, was implicated in a burglary that occurred in Bethlehem Township, Pennsylvania ... New NWA champion Jeff Jarrett beat Hacksaw Duggan, who was a mystery opponent chosen by Jimmy Hart ... TNA X champion Michael Shane retained his title against Jerry Lynn ... WWE earned a $17.1-million profit in its third quarter ... Kevin Nash was advised to undergo neck surgery ... Bill DeMott was expected to become *Velocity's* new color commentator after being diagnosed with a career-ending neck injury ... At No Mercy, Zach Gowen defeated Matt Hardy for his first WWE singles win ... Homicide beat Ring of Honor champion Samoa Joe in a non-title bout ... Matt Cappotelli, who was knocked around by Hardcore Holly on *Tough Enough III,* got a shot at his former trainer in Ohio Valley, but The Disciples of Synn attacked the youngster before there could be a clear winner ... Jesse Ventura's *America* joined MSNBC's weekend lineup and drew only 194,000 viewers ... Qenaan Creed won a tournament to become the first Urban Empire Wrestling champion in Philadelphia ... In a case prosecuted by the U.S. federal government in Alexandria, Virginia, Michael E. King of Mark Out Video pleaded guilty to unauthorized distribution of $16,000 worth of WWE, WCW, and Ring of Honor videotapes, and faced a maximum sentence of three years in prison, a fine of up to $250,000, plus full reimbursement.

Owen: case finally closed

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH
LEWMAR INC. SETTLES WITH WWE

Owen Hart's fatal fall at Over the Edge 1999 triggered a series of heart-wrenching and infuriating lawsuits, all designed to bring closure to his tragic death. His widow, Martha, tenaciously sought restitution against WWE, which denied responsibility for the failed stunt. Although Martha eventually won an $18-million lawsuit on behalf of herself, her children, and Owen's parents, WWE attorneys insisted that it was actually Lewmar Inc.—the British manufacturer of the harness her husband was wearing in the rafters of Kansas City's Kemper Arena—that was liable.

WWE pointed to the fact that Lewmar Inc. actually possessed liability insurance that would have covered the $18-million lawsuit. That's why WWE opted to sue Lewmar for the full amount. According to the *Stamford* (Connecticut) *Advocate,* Lewmar agreed to settle the case out of court with exactly half that sum, $9-million, plus legal fees, which brought the total to $13-million. Lewmar's liability insurance was enough to cover the settlement.

More than four years after Owen's death, the legal wrangling seemed to have finally reached a conclusion.

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: DUSTY RHODES

At 57 years old, Dusty Rhodes is the oldest wrestler to be selected as our Wrestler of the Month. This is no token gesture, either, because "The American Dream" almost beat A.J. Styles for a fourth NWA heavyweight title. It all began at TNA's October 1 pay-per-view, when Rhodes and Jeff Jarrett defeated Styles and a heavily padded Vince Russo … and big Dust had the honor of dropping a massive elbow and pinning the NWA champ. Styles demanded a match with Rhodes, and agreed to put the NWA title on the line.

The following week, Styles easily bloodied Rhodes and dominated most of the match. The momentum changed, however, when the NWA champ missed a shooting Styles press and the "Dream" applied a figure-four leglock. Styles began tapping out … but the referee had been knocked down in the fracas. The crafty young champion eventually grabbed a bat from Russo, who happened to be stumbling drunk on this night, and hit Rhodes with it. He put the unconscious Rhodes in a figure-four of his own, and the referee recovered in time to see Rhodes flat on his back and made the three-count.

Afterward, Sonny Siaki and Ekmo (Jamal from Three Minute Warning) ran into the ring and helped Styles and a drunken Russo attack Rhodes. Chris Harris and James Storm tried to save Rhodes, but Styles swatted them with the bat. Jeff Jarrett arrived with a steel chair to restore order. Oddly enough, Jarrett seemed to resent Rhodes for getting so much attention. Jarrett's ambitions would become clear later in the month.

But that didn't spoil Rhodes' amazing week. For him, it had felt like 1986 all over again.

Still going strong at 57!

MATCH OF THE MONTH
KURT ANGLE vs. JOHN CENA

A pay-per-view win over Kurt Angle would immediately thrust John Cena into Smackdown's top tier. Then again, a loss to Cena would destroy Angle's momentum, and might plant him directly beside Chris Benoit in the mid-card ranks. At No Mercy, Cena was the hunter, rapping that he was "the tiger" to Angle's "Siegfried and Roy."

Cena tried to match the Olympian hold-for-hold in the early going, but didn't have much success. Cena went for a hiptoss, but Angle took the wannabe gangsta over with a fireman's carry and again with an armdrag. Some fans at the 1st Mariner Arena cheered when Cena trapped Angle in a side headlock and knocked him down with a shoulderblock.

Then the master of thuganomics took it to the street. Cena punched his opponent several times in the corner and unleashed a back elbow that bloodied Angle's mouth. Angle, in turn, became scientifically rough, attempting to give Cena a German suplex to the arena floor, but Cena blocked it and spiked the former Smackdown champ with a DDT on the ring apron. Back inside the ring, Cena gave Angle a guillotine legdrop. Angle responded with a German suplex, and Cena shot back with a somersault stunner. After absorbing three more German suplexes, Cena started to make a comeback. He eventually executed the FU and clocked the Olympian with his own gold medals, but both times, he failed to put him away.

In the end, Angle caught Cena with a victory roll into the anklelock. At the 18-minute mark, Angle forced Cena into submission. Siegfried and Roy had the last laugh.

Coulda been a breakout win for Cena

A Freebird again for one night!

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH
MICHAEL HAYES SERENADES TRIPLE-H AND STEPHANIE

Vince McMahon isn't classy very often, but he undoubtedly dreamed of the day that he would give away the hand of his daughter, Stephanie, in holy matrimony. The ceremony in Sleepy Hollow, New York, was simple and tasteful. But Steph and Triple-H made the mistake of inviting WWE agent Michael Hayes, the world's worst wedding singer.

Indeed, the headless horseman himself couldn't have emerged from the village's quaint streets and made a more disturbing ruckus. Like Washington Irving's other famous character, Rip Van Winkle, Hayes must have woken up and thought he was still in the 1980s, when he pretended to be a Southern rocker with releases such as "Badstreet U.S.A." and "The Boys Are Back In Town." Hayes also must have thought he was at a rowdy corner bar, not the wedding reception of Vince McMahon's baby girl. He sang a horrible rendition of "Jailhouse Rock" and, when he later insisted on taking the stage again, the band refused to go along. He decided to sing without music. *Ouch!*

According to those attending the reception, Hayes really crossed the line with his tacky dedication. "This song goes out to Stephanie and Hunter," he stammered. "[Expletive], I mean Stephanie and Paul, 'The Billion-Dollar Princess' and 'The Million-Dollar Talent.'" Some of Hayes' friends tried to tell him to back off, but it was Linda McMahon who eventually took his microphone with a terse, "Thank you, Michael."

Sure, the Freebird made a spectacle of himself. But Terry Gordy would have been proud.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"That was one of the most brutal matches of my career. Those canes don't have much give. They're hollow on the inside, but they're still made of bamboo. Those canes definitely stung. It was a real eye-opener."

—John Walters, commenting on his upset victory over Steven Richards in a cane match at a Chaotic Wrestling event in 2002, "Introducing," *The Wrestler,* March 2004

"Certainly, there's a lot of pressure. Neither one of us are quote-unquote wrestlers. It's going to be challenging physically ... I'm always really nervous. But before I go out to do this with my dad, it's going to be unbelievable how nervous I get."

—Stephanie McMahon, describing her state of mind before her "I Quit" match with Vince McMahon at No Mercy, the *Fredericksburg* (Virginia) *Free Lance-Star*

"I don't care about winning, I don't care about losing, I don't care about championships. I just care about putting on the best match I can and having people entertained because this is show business."

—Chris Jericho, promoting himself as more of a showman than an athlete, the *Winnipeg Sun*

"They recognize how we are important to kids nowadays and how we are talked about as much as sports celebrities, as well as the Britney Spears and *NSyncers, so it's kind of cool they're recognizing us within that genre and putting us out there with them."

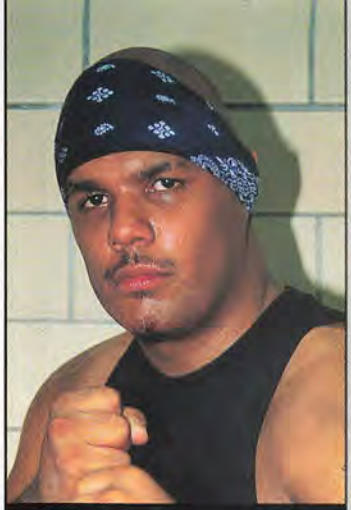
—Trish Stratus, explaining why youth entertainment magazines are interested in wrestlers and divas, wwe.com

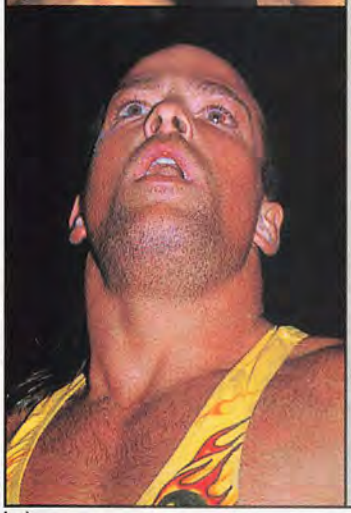
"A guy with three initials in his name made sure I didn't ... and the initials aren't RVD."

—Rob Van Dam, speculating on why he was never given a chance at a WWE Raw title run, *Get In The Ring* radio show

"I will strike down the face of defiance!"

—Vince McMahon, vowing to beat obedience into his daughter, *Smackdown*





WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Triple-H: Got the keys to the kingdom
Paul Heyman: Looked 20 pounds healthier
The Big Show: But does that U.S. belt fit him?
Homicide: Killed Samoa Joe's momentum
Dusty Rhodes: His "Dream" almost came true

LOSERS

A.J. Styles: Made room for Hogan, who didn't come
Eddie Guerrero: Lost his "Heat" because of B.S.
Sonny Siaki: Funk was on his conscience
Michael Hayes: Even Lynyrd Skynyrd is sober now
Rob Van Dam: RVD stood for "Run Vince down!"

"You're no different than Roddy Piper, Bret Hart, 'Macho Man,' Hulk Hogan. You're all the same because you'd cut your mother's throat to get what you wanted."

—Jeff Jarrett, accusing Dusty Rhodes of double-crossing him for an NWA title shot, Total Nonstop Action

"Once I started to make a name for myself in ECW, I talked to Shane Helms (The Hurricane), and he said somebody was talking to Arn about a guy in ECW using the Anderson name. Arn's reaction was that I've heard of him, I heard he was a pretty good worker, and I hope he had better success than I did."

—C.W. Anderson, neglecting to say whether he had inquired about Ole or Lars, wrestlingobserver.com

no
Damn,
Vince is losing
a lot of blood...

vember

WWE TENDS TO choose Survivor Series as the place to switch gears by reassessing the company's creative direction and beginning to pave the road to WrestleMania. Survivor Series 2003 was no different, as Team Bischoff beat Team Austin to make Eric Bischoff the sole general manager of Raw, at least for a little while, and to send Austin back home to Victoria, Texas, for a short vacation. WWE Raw champion Bill Goldberg took a small step toward shaking himself free of Triple-H by scoring his second straight win over him, but "The Game" wasn't expected to give up so easily. Over on Smackdown, John Cena took a huge step toward becoming the most popular star on that roster.

NWA-TNA continued to cause controversy in November, yet it didn't concern questionable business models this time. Lex Luger, who had been arrested for illegal possession of prescription and muscle-enhancing drugs in an investigation stemming from Elizabeth's death on May 1, made his debut for the promotion. Was TNA simply giving Luger a second chance ... or exploiting a tragedy in an attempt to boost a buy rate?

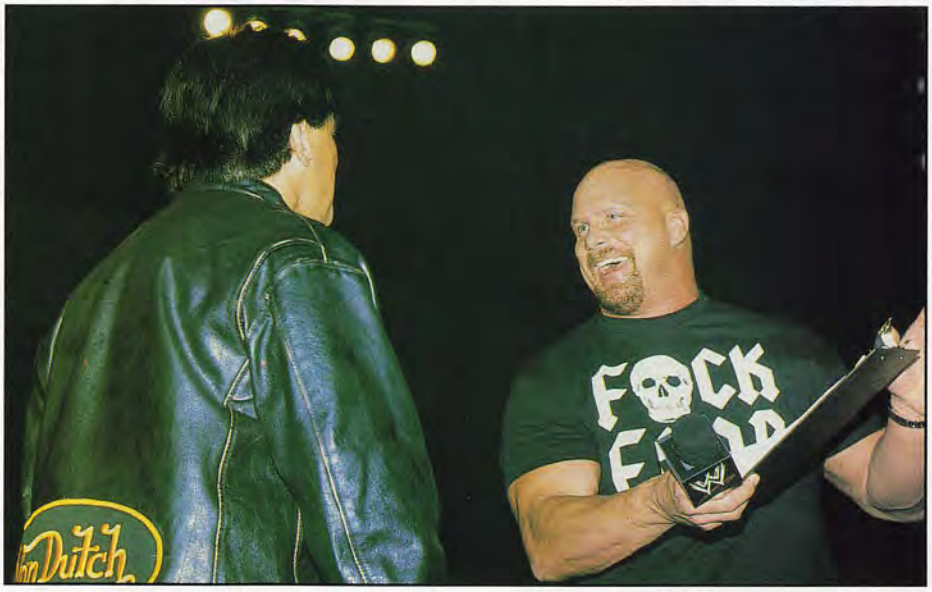
Some of the most newsworthy events were deaths that didn't make much news. Former NWA champ Dick Hutton died in relative anonymity in Oklahoma. Michael Lockwood, a.k.a. Crash Holly, died in Florida, but WWE hardly acknowledged his passing. Moondog Spot, however, died in public at the Mid-South Coliseum, yet he didn't garner many 10-bell salutes anywhere else. Here at WRESTLING ANNUAL, we salute them all.

STEVE AUSTIN LOSES POWER TO ERIC BISCHOFF

After six months of near-constant arguing, Steve Austin and Eric Bischoff reached a stalemate. The solution? Austin and Bischoff each chose five men to represent them in a classic Survivor Series elimination match. If Austin's team lost, he would have to leave Raw. If his team won, he would be free to get physical with any Raw star even if he wasn't physically provoked first.

Austin selected Booker T, Shawn Michaels, Rob Van Dam, and The Dudley Boyz. Bischoff picked Christian, Chris Jericho, Mark Henry, Randy Orton, and Scott Steiner.

Booker T scored the first elimination when Stacy Keibler distracted Scott Steiner, enabling Booker to floor Steiner with the Book-end and get the three-count. Mark Henry immediately surprised Booker T with a powerslam and scored a pinfall for his team. The Dudley Boyz and



This time, Austin wasn't laughing

"As long as Triple-H was still around, [Goldberg] would never have the opportunity to carry Raw as its main star."

Rob Van Dam displayed excellent teamwork in eliminating Henry, however, when the Dudleys gave him the 3D, Van Dam followed with a frog splash, and all three men piled on top of him to gain the pinfall. In the ensuing minutes, Randy Orton used the RKO to pin Van Dam, Jericho delivered a flying clothesline to pin D-Von Dudley, and Christian executed the unprettier to eliminate Buh Buh Ray Dudley.

That left Shawn Michaels against three men. Undeterred, "The Heartbreak Kid" managed to pin Christian and Jericho. Co-GM Bischoff tried to hit Michaels with a kick, but Austin attacked Bischoff and gave Randy Orton a stunner. While the referee was distracted by Austin and Bischoff, Batista ran into the ring and gave Michaels a thunderous power bomb at the 27-minute mark. That allowed Orton to not only eliminate Michaels from the match, but also eliminate "Stone-Cold" from Raw.

The Dallas crowd gave a misty-eyed Austin a standing ovation.

Two in a row for Goldberg!

RAW CHAMPION GOLDBERG DEFEATS TRIPLE-H AT SURVIVOR SERIES

Bill Goldberg hoped the rumors of Triple-H going to Hollywood were true. In their two previous high-profile matches, Triple-H had survived Goldberg's challenge in the "Elimination Chamber" at SummerSlam, and Goldberg had beaten Triple-H for the Raw title at Unforgiven. Goldberg knew that for the good of his career, Survivor Series had to be his final confrontation with Triple-H. As long as Triple-H was still around, he would never have the opportunity to carry Raw as its main star.

The WWE Raw champion didn't take any chances. Goldberg speared Triple-H before the bell. He continued the assault and lifted "The Game" high for an overhead press-slam, but Goldberg's ankle—which Evolution had attacked several times in recent weeks—gave way under their weight. Ric Flair ran into the ring and gave Goldberg a kneedrop.

After referee Earl Hebner was knocked down, Triple-H hit Goldberg with a pair of brass knuckles. Hebner recovered to make the count, but the champion kicked out at two. Triple-H delivered a flying elbowsmash and retrieved his trusty sledgehammer. Goldberg, however, grabbed it from Triple-H and smashed all three interfering members of Evolution—Flair, Randy Orton, and Batista—with the weapon.

Triple-H capitalized on the distraction and planted Goldberg with the pedigree. Goldberg kicked out and, quickly recovering, grabbed the hammer again. He was tempted to hit Triple-H with it, but threw it out of the ring instead. "Da Man" had a better idea. He used the spear and jackhammer and pinned the former champ after 11 minutes of action.

LEX LUGER DEBUTS IN NWA-TNA

In the most controversial move of its 18-month history, NWA-TNA booked Lex Luger for a one-night-only appearance.

More Luger controversy

Luger had been deep in legal trouble ever since his long-time girlfriend, Elizabeth Hulette, died of a lethal mixture of drugs and alcohol in his Georgia townhome on May 1. During a search of the home, police reported finding large quantities of illegal drugs, including anabolic steroids and OxyContin. While police didn't believe Luger was responsible for Elizabeth's death in any way, he was arrested for illegal drug possession. As of November 12, the date of his appearance on TNA pay-per-view, Luger still hadn't gone to trial for those charges.

That night, Luger teamed with NWA champion Jeff Jarrett to face A.J. Styles and Sting. According to sources, it was Sting who had lobbied TNA to give his old friend a chance. Luger hadn't appeared in the ring since touring Europe with World Wrestling All-Stars in late-2002. The former WCW World champion had been criticized for his poor stamina and lack of effort during that tour, and he appeared to be in only slightly better shape for his TNA appearance. Styles pinned Luger in the tag team encounter.

TNA President Dixie Carter addressed the controversy in a statement: "For the fans, TNA provides a weekly program that showcases today's hottest talent, introduces the stars of tomorrow, and provides the opportunity to re-experience wrestling icons ... The success of bringing Lex to TNA won't be measured with pay-per-view buys. It will be measured by what a man does with an opportunity given."

"While police didn't believe Luger was responsible for Elizabeth's death in any way, he was arrested for illegal drug possession."

FORMER NWA WORLD CHAMPION DICK HUTTON DIES

Dick Hutton, best remembered for his 14-month NWA World title reign in the late-1950s, died of natural causes on November 24 at St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He was 80 years old.

Born on October 4, 1923, in Amarillo, Texas, Hutton rose to prominence at Oklahoma A&M University when he defeated future pro wrestlers Verne Gagne and Ray Gunkel en route to winning his first of three NCAA heavyweight titles. Leroy McGuirk and Karl Gotch helped train Hutton for the pro ranks, and Strangler Lewis ranked him with greats such as Frank Gotch, Joe Stecher, and John Pesek in terms of technical ability.

Hutton's career moment came on November 15, 1957, as a last-minute replacement for Whipper Watson in a title challenge of NWA World champion Lou Thesz in Toronto. Seven years younger than Thesz, the 5'10", 245-pounder dominated the champ

Dick Hutton vs. Buddy Rogers

"He will be remembered for his 21 WWE hardcore title reigns ... and for popularizing the 24/7 rule, which stipulated that a champion could be beaten at any time of the day or night as long as his opponent had a licensed referee with him."

after the 30-minute mark and forced him to submit with his famed cobra twist, a hold requiring Hutton to clamp his arms onto his opponent's shoulders and twist his back at a 45-degree angle.

"He didn't look like a muscleman, but he had good balance and was very sophisticated in his moves," Thesz told *PWI* in 2000. Unfortunately, Hutton lacked charisma and a passion for the business, and dropped the NWA title to Pat O'Connor on January 9, 1959.

Although Hutton remained highly respected, even appearing in Japan on occasion, he wrestled primarily as a midcarder in Toronto, Ohio, and Los Angeles until his retirement in 1965. In addition to the NWA belt, Hutton also held the Midwest, Ohio State, and WLW TV titles.

CRASH HOLLY DIES AT 32

Michael John Lockwood, professionally known as Crash Holly in WWE and Mad Mikey in NWA-TNA, was found dead in the Florida home of Steven Richards on November 6, reportedly of issues related to alcohol or drugs. According to the police report, Lockwood was found partially clothed with a pool of vomit around his face.

Considering his relatively small size, listed generously at 5'9" and 204 pounds, Lockwood had a surprisingly enduring career with WWE—a testament to his solid technical skills and overall showmanship. Lockwood first rose to prominence as Erin O'Grady, a popular leprechaun character in California's All Pro Wrestling. He became a trainer there, and was an inspiration to the APW rank-and-file once he achieved greater success.

Lockwood joined WWE as Crash Holly, the tough but dopey little cousin of Hardcore Holly, with whom he once held the WWE World tag title. He will be remembered for his 21 WWE hardcore title reigns (some of them lasting mere seconds) and for popularizing the 24/7 rule, which stipulated that a champion could be beaten at any time of the day or night as long as his opponent had a licensed referee with him.

WWE released Lockwood in 2003 and he made numerous appearances on the indy circuit, even participating in MCW's Shane Shamrock Memorial Cup, and joined NWA-TNA as Mad Mikey, a character similar to Crash—just with a shorter fuse.

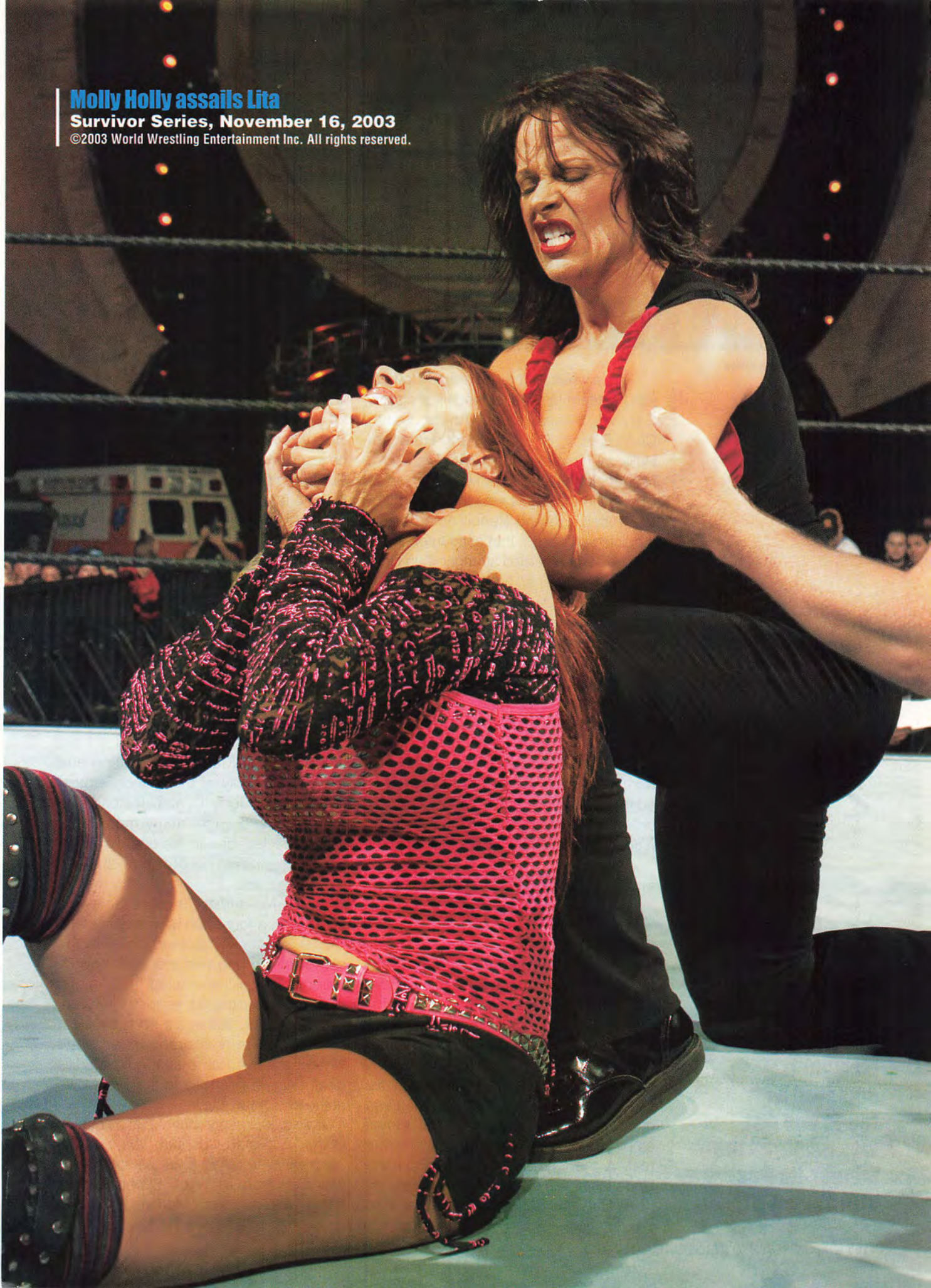
"He was the biggest goofball," said his wife, Christeena, in an interview with North Carolina's *Salisbury Post*. "He was so funny walking up and down the ropes, doing things to make you laugh, and telling corny jokes."

Lockwood left behind a seven-year-old daughter, Patty.

Mad Mikey clowning with Shark Boy

JOHN CENA JOINS TEAM ANGLE FOR SURVIVOR SERIES

Who will be the next Rock? After it became obvious that John Cena was making strides to become the most popular wrestler on the Smackdown roster, it looked like the gangsta wannabe just might be WWE's hot new main-eventer. The once-hated Cena had been cheered at WWE venues for months and had gained significant momentum in the recent U.S. title tournament, but he became a full-fledged fan favorite after Smackdown General Manager Paul Heyman ordered him to join Team Lesnar for Survivor Series. Cena responded, "Nobody tells me what to do," and Heyman promptly replaced him with A-Train.



Molly Holly assails Lita
Survivor Series, November 16, 2003
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Suddenly, they were allies

That's when Kurt Angle asked Cena to join his team instead, setting up a classic Survivor Series match: Angle, Cena, Chris Benoit, Bradshaw, and Hardcore Holly vs. Lesnar, A-Train, The Big Show, Nathan Jones, and Matt Morgan. Cena's FU of The Big Show was the highlight of the match. He and Benoit emerged as the sole survivors in that encounter.

But Cena emerged stronger than Benoit, especially after he verbally attacked Vince McMahon and Sable on *Smackdown* two nights later. Cena went on to replace Benoit on several house shows against WWE Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar in large part because Cena was considered the hotter act. While attendance for those events was a bit higher than that of most recent shows, Cena couldn't take the credit, because the Lesnar-Cena bouts were not advertised in advance. Nevertheless, WWE officials believed they had given ticket-buying fans a good reason to come back for more.

VINCE McMAHON BURIES THE UNDERTAKER ALIVE

Leading into WrestleMania XIX, many comments were made regarding Vince McMahon's tumultuous 20-year business relationship with Hulk Hogan. But for nearly half that time, Hogan was not a McMahon employee and worked either for WCW or as a free agent. The Undertaker, on the other hand, had spent 12 full years of his life working for McMahon and must be considered WWE's most loyal employee over the past decade. For that reason, the feud between McMahon and Undertaker was even more emotional.

At Survivor Series, it was a battle to the figurative death. The Undertaker got what he demanded: a buried alive match, complete with a mound of dirt and a tombstone. Only moments after the match began inside the ring, The Undertaker opened a bloody gash on the side of McMahon's face. 'Taker was clearly in a hurry. After slamming McMahon's knee into a ringpost, he took the shovel from the gravesite and bashed him with it.

The Undertaker dragged a bleeding and limping McMahon to the gravesite. The feisty WWE chairman fought back, though, tossing dirt in his face and giving him a low blow. Undertaker's arm was sliced in several places in a fight over the shovel. Eventually, Undertaker succeeded in shoving McMahon into the grave. He walked toward the tractor that was to be used to dump the dirt into the hole. But it exploded, and Kane appeared on the scene. Kane rescued McMahon and kicked his half-brother into the grave. McMahon, smeared with blood and dirt, was declared the winner. He was still alive.

And one had to think "The Dead Man" would rise again to battle Kane ... perhaps in time for WrestleMania XX.

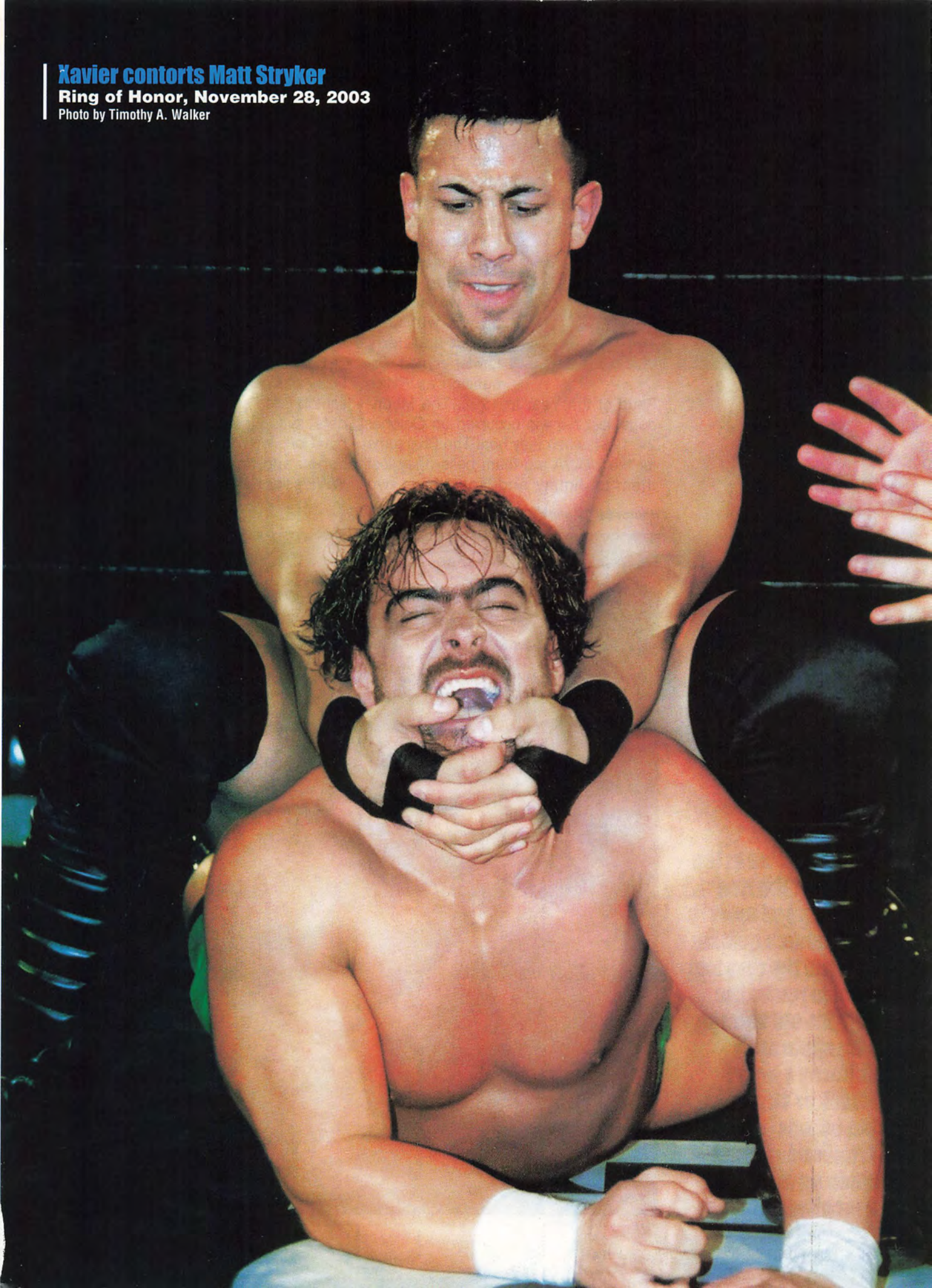
"Kane rescued McMahon and kicked his half-brother into the grave. McMahon, smeared with blood and dirt, was declared the winner. He was still alive."

MOONDOG SPOT DIES DURING MEMPHIS MATCH

The event, held at the famed Mid-South Coliseum, was supposed to be a celebration of Memphis wrestling and the 54th birthday of the territory's most famous star, Jerry Lawler. Instead, the tribute show brought many more tears than expected, due to the death of Larry Booker, known professionally as Moondog Spot.

At the November 29 show, Spot was involved in a four-team concession stand brawl. Suddenly, Spot sat down in the corner of the ring and stopped moving. Paramedics quickly entered the ring and tried to revive the 61-year-old veteran, who apparently suffered a heart attack or stroke, but he was pronounced dead when he arrived at a local hospital. His death was announced to the live crowd at the end of the show.

It was oddly appropriate that Spot died in the Mid-South Coliseum, the home of his greatest victories. Ever the scrapper, it was even more fitting that Spot died while doing what he loved—fighting it out with



Xavier contorts Matt Stryker
Ring of Honor, November 28, 2003
Photo by Timothy A. Walker

Moondogs Spot, Spike, and Cujo (1992)

the best of them.

Most of Spot's triumphs occurred in Memphis, including reigns as a Mid-Southern and USWA tag team champion, usually with Moondog Rex, sometimes with Moondog King. Their wild series of brawls with Jeff Jarrett and Jerry Lawler earned recognition as *PWI's* Feud of the Year in 1992. The Moondogs' last big win occurred on October 24, 1994, when they beat The Phantoms for the USWA tag team belts (they lost them to Jimmy and Ron Harris two months later).

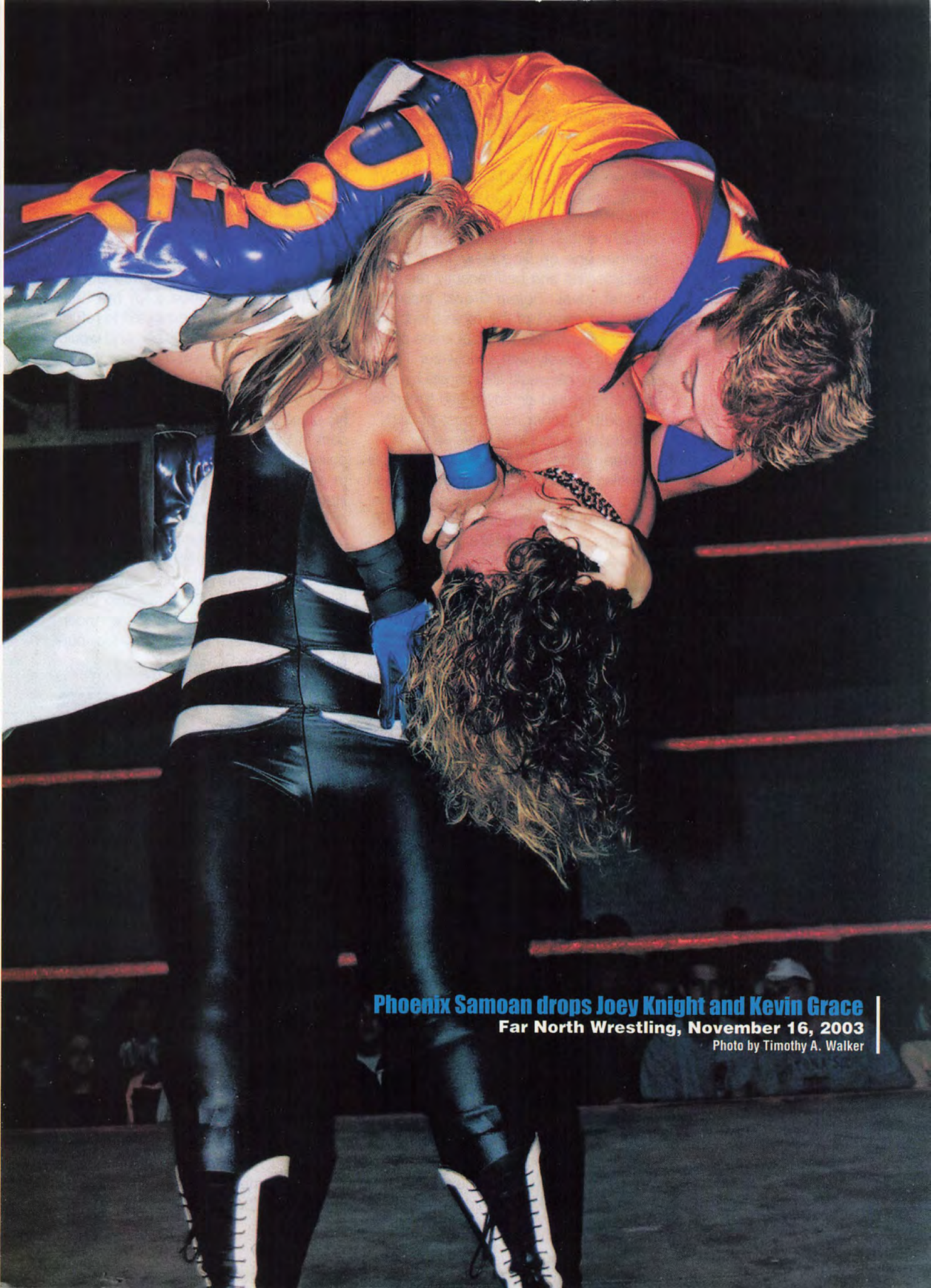
The highlight of Spot's career was his run in the WWF, under the management of Capt. Lou Albano. Moondogs Rex and King beat Tony Garea and Rick Martel for the WWF tag team title on March 17, 1981, but Spot replaced King in the middle of that title reign. Garea and Martel regained the straps on July 21 of the same year.

MICK FOLEY CONSIDERED FOR CBS SERIES

Former WWF World champion Mick Foley was pegged as the star of a potential television series about a Tampa Bay detective. Vince and Linda McMahon have long wanted to produce a television series and finally took advantage of WWE's ties with Viacom, the parent com-

Hooray for *TV star* Foley?

"Suddenly, Spot sat down in the corner of the ring and stopped moving. Paramedics quickly entered the ring and tried to revive the 61-year-old veteran, who apparently suffered a heart attack or stroke, but he was pronounced dead when he arrived at a local hospital."



Phoenix Samoan drops Joey Knight and Kevin Grace
Far North Wrestling, November 16, 2003
Photo by Timothy A. Walker

"He noted that he felt lucky that his wounds—from a mortar attack—weren't all that serious and was looking forward to coming home for the holidays. He also said he expected to return to wrestling in the near future."

pany of Spike TV, to do it. That relationship opened the door to another Viacom property, the CBS Network, which was reportedly very interested in at least a one-hour pilot.

It would be the first TV project for WWE Films, which already had a movie starring Triple-H in the works. For Foley, who had already written two books that reached number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list and had recently released his first novel, *Tietam Brown,* the most appealing aspect of the project was that he would have creative input in the series and work closely with scriptwriter Teddy Tenebaum. He would also handle his own stunts. Foley had already forged a relationship with Viacom as co-host of TNN's *Robot Wars* a couple of years earlier.

Meanwhile, Foley returned to the wrestling spotlight when Linda McMahon named him a new co-general manager of Raw, sharing power with Eric Bischoff. Insiders believed there was a good chance of Foley battling Triple-H, the man who forced him to retire in 2000, at WrestleMania XX.

Chilly Willy, American hero

CHILLY WILLY AWARDED THE PURPLE HEART

Almost immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, William Jones (professionally known as Chilly Willy) demonstrated the ultimate act of patriotism by joining the U.S. military. Earlier in 2003, Jones found himself in the middle of war-torn Iraq along with other Coalition forces trying to stabilize the country after the fall of Baghdad. Soon after that, Jones' family and friends learned that he had suffered wounds while there and, as a result, had been awarded the Purple Heart.

The Purple Heart is awarded to members of the Armed Forces who are wounded by the enemy, or given to the families of those who die in combat. As of early-December, Jones had recovered from his wounds and returned to duty in Iraq. He later posted an open letter on 1wrestling.com, thanking everyone in the wrestling word for supporting the troops. He noted that he felt lucky that his wounds—from a mortar attack—weren't all that serious and was looking forward to coming home for the holidays. He also said he expected to return to wrestling in the near future and would be "looking for a shot at a chance to kick butt in the WWE and TNA."

By early-2001, Chilly Willy had traded his place on the independent circuit for a spot in ECW's lower tier, where his raw potential and charisma became apparent to a national audience. Nicknamed "Mr. Homeboy," Willy was quickly becoming one of the most popular stars in the company. He is best remembered for teaming with Mahoney against Da Baldies in Chicago, Illinois. Willy first established himself in Southern Championship Wrestling as a perennial rival of C.W. Anderson and Kid Kash before they, too, pursued careers in ECW.

IN OTHER NEWS

The *Tennessean* newspaper, based in Nashville, reported that 100,000 viewers watched NWA-TNA pay-per-views each week, which would amount to approximately 25,000 households ... WWE Smackdown tag team champions The Basham Brothers beat Los Guerreros at Survivor Series ... Also at the pay-per-view, Kane defeated Shane McMahon in an ambulance match, and women's champion Molly Holly beat Lita ... Kurt Angle lost feeling in his left hand due to a chair shot, and an MRI revealed that a bone chip was impinging upon his nerve ... Spike Dudley missed ring time with a bruised back ... A.J. Styles scored his second impressive win over American Dragon, this time at a Ring of Honor show in Elizabeth, New Jersey ... Both The Learning Channel and the U.K.'s ITV were developing *Tough Enough*-style programs featuring indy wrestlers ... Chance Beckett returned to NWA Extreme Canadian Championship Wrestling after a lengthy absence.

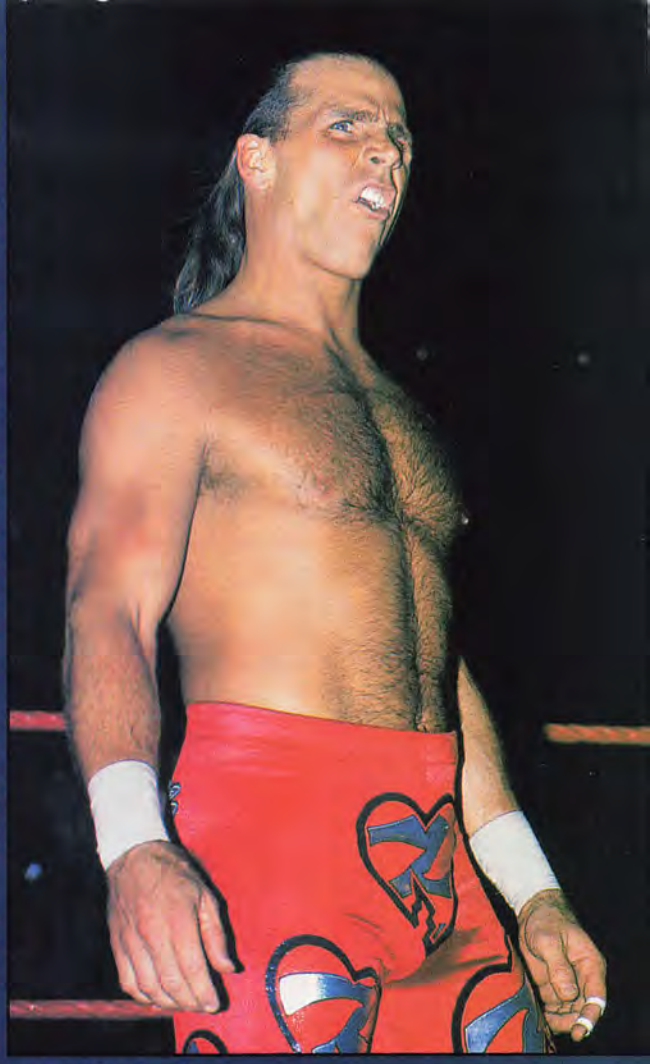
WRESTLER OF THE MONTH SHAWN MICHAELS

Once again in his career, Shawn Michaels became the showstopper. For many fans, it was Michaels—not Steve Austin, not Bill Goldberg, and not John Cena—who left the most memorable impression at Survivor Series. He turned on the old magic in the final 10 minutes of the classic Survivor Series match pitting Team Austin—comprised of Michaels, Booker T, Rob Van Dam, and The Dudley Boyz—opposite Team Bischoff, consisting of Christian, Chris Jericho, Mark Henry, Randy Orton, and Scott Steiner.

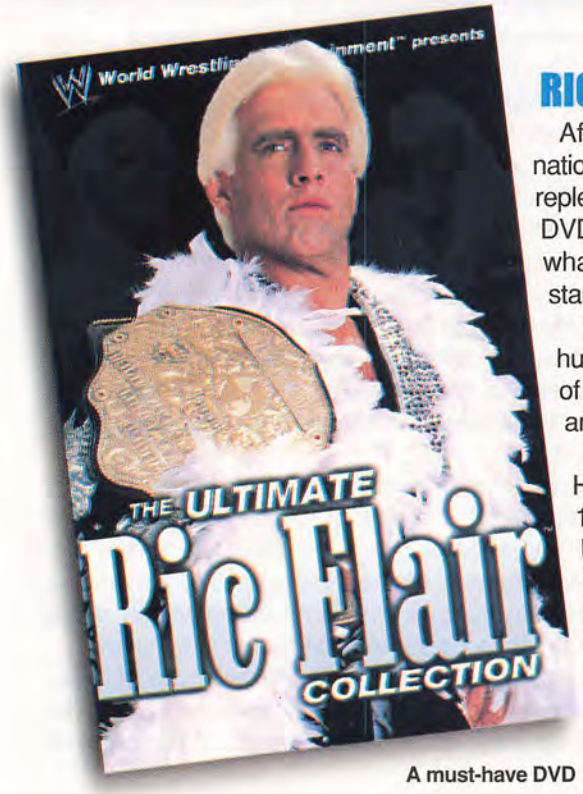
At the 17-minute mark, Michaels was left alone against Christian, Jericho, and Orton. Christian catapulted Michaels into a ringpost, opening a bloody wound. But Michaels surprised Christian with some sweet chin music and pinned him. A few minutes later, he maneuvered out of the Walls of Jericho and twisted it into an inside cradle, pinning the former undisputed champ. Jericho smashed Michaels with a steel chair before leaving.

Orton attempted to finish off Michaels with a cross-body-block from the top rope, but accidentally knocked down referee Chad Patton instead. Eric Bischoff, realizing that Austin's job as Raw co-general manager was on the line, jumped into the ring and tried to kick Michaels. Steve Austin attacked Bischoff and gave Orton the stunner.

Then Batista ran into the ring and power-bombed Michaels, enabling Orton to pin "The Heartbreak Kid." After the match, Michaels kept telling Austin, "I'm sorry." Yet Austin wouldn't let HBK blame himself. Michaels might have cost "Stone-Cold" his job, but he had earned Austin's respect.



Gutsy effort by HBK



A must-have DVD

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH
RIC FLAIR DVD COLLECTION SELLS OUT IN A HURRY

After *The Ultimate Ric Flair Collection* began selling out at stores nationwide, even to the point that Sony Distribution didn't have any left to replenish the supply, Raw announcer Jim Ross began to tout Flair as "Mr. DVD." It was a lighthearted poke at the "Nature Boy," subtly indicating what Flair had meant to the business—although promoters had constantly undervalued his true worth.

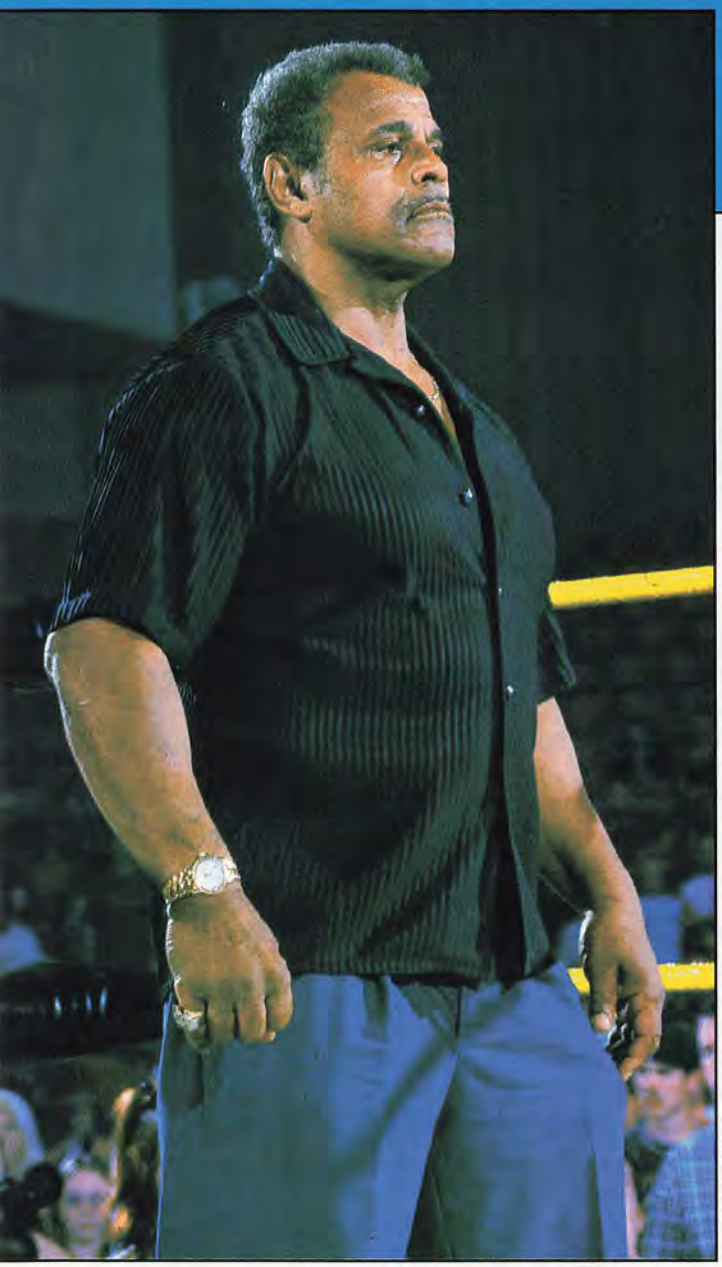
WWE executives should have known that the Flair DVD warranted a huge supply, especially when the collection was listed at a bargain price of $34.95. Moreover, this ultimate collection transcended Flair himself, and was really a journey through pro wrestling over the past 25 years.

Consider the historic matches included in the compilation: Flair vs. Harley Race at Starrcade 1983, Flair vs. Dusty Rhodes at Starrcade 1985, Flair vs. Barry Windham on a 1987 broadcast of *World Wide Wrestling,* Flair vs. Steamboat at Clash of the Champions VI, Flair vs. Steamboat at Wrestle War 1989, Flair vs. Terry Funk in an "I Quit" match at Clash of the Champions IX, the 1992 Royal Rumble, Flair vs. Sting at Clash of the Champions XXVII, and Flair vs. Triple-H on a 2003 edition of *Raw.*

The Ultimate Ric Flair Collection sold out faster than any wrestling DVD in history. By the end of the month, Sony was scrambling to release more copies of the DVD in time for Christmas.

MATCH OF THE MONTH
TEAM ANGLE vs. TEAM LESNAR, CLASSIC SURVIVOR SERIES MATCH

At Survivor Series, all five members of Team Angle sought vindication. Kurt Angle wanted to outclass Smackdown champ Brock Lesnar again, Chris Benoit wanted at the very least to prove that he—and not The Big Show—deserved to be U.S. champion, Bradshaw wanted to prove he didn't need Faarooq to win, Bob Holly wanted vengeance against Lesnar for injuring his neck, and John Cena wanted to prove that Paul Heyman had made a serious mistake by not trying harder to recruit him for Team Lesnar. Smackdown's two singles champions, Lesnar and Big Show, were the prime targets ... but Team Angle would have to get through the gigantic trio of A-Train, Nathan Jones, and Matt Morgan first.



Rock *Sr. ... ah,* what's the difference?

Three men were eliminated before or immediately after the opening bell. Referee Brian Hebner disqualified Holly for attacking Lesnar before the match, Bradshaw used a clothesline from hell to derail A-Train, and Big Show choke-slammed Bradshaw for a quick pinfall. Lesnar, Big Show, Jones, and Morgan worked over Cena in their corner.

The crowd went wild when Cena finally tagged Angle. The Olympian executed an Angle slam to pin Morgan, and forced Jones into submission with the anklelock. But Lesnar stopped Angle with F5 and pinned his arch-rival at the nine-minute mark.

Benoit and Cena were left to face Lesnar and Big Show. Benoit forced the Smackdown champion into submission with the crossface, prompting chants of "You tapped out!" directed at Lesnar. Big Show choke-slammed Benoit, but Cena nailed Show with a chain and planted the 485-pounder with the FU. Benoit and Cena were declared the winners.

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH
THEY COULD *ALMOST* SMELL THE ROCK

Rocky Johnson's here, so The Rock can't be far behind, right? Memphis fans realized that logic was quite flawed in November. Then again, wasn't that a natural assumption for fans to make when Johnson suddenly appeared on *Memphis Wrestling?*

That, coupled with rumors that The Rock would be shooting a movie near Memphis, made it almost a sure thing that "The Great One" would appear at Jerry Lawler's big birthday bash, an event that would be celebrated with a wrestling show at the famed Mid-South Coliseum. After all, The Rock had wrestled in Memphis as Flex Kavana in the mid-1990s, and he owed a debt of gratitude to Lawler for helping him in those early days.

The case seemed even more compelling when Mabel attacked Johnson on television, severely injuring Rock Sr.'s ribs. Many locals assumed The Rock would wrestle Mabel in the main event, as implausible as that sounds to folks outside of Memphis. But in the week or so just before the November 29 event, Johnson made a miraculous recovery.

The "Soulman" took on the former King of the Ring in a boxing match. After a couple of rounds, Mabel threw off his gloves and attempted to piledrive Johnson, but Mabel's long-time partner, Mo, ran to the ring like a man on a mission. He shocked the crowd by hitting Mabel with a spinning kick. The referee ruled the match a no-contest.

The ticket-buyers hoping for a last-minute surprise were disappointed. They could almost smell what The Rock was cooking. Instead, they had to settle for some leftover soul food.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"Kurt could very well be the greatest pro wrestler of his generation. I'm not going to try to compare the two brothers, because that's simply not fair. But Eric is a hell of a talent in his own right. He's got tremendous amateur skills, and a natural ring presence. If he can keep himself healthy and get another shot, I could see him in WWE. Kurt couldn't ask for a better partner than his brother."

—Jim Cornette, predicting that Eric Angle will leave the independent circuit to join his brother in WWE someday, "Eric Angle: 'I'm The Only Partner My Brother Can Trust,'" *The Wrestler,* March 2004

"When I was in Japan at the same time as Hogan, I knew his knee had taken a lickin'. The story I've heard is that when he got home, the swelling on his knee still hadn't gone down. He thought it would subside after a few days, but it got worse instead of better … I don't think the guitar shots helped very much. Me steppin' and poundin' on his knee didn't help, and neither did his trippin' and fallin'. I don't think any of it helped."

—Jeff Jarrett, commenting on the knee injury that caused Hulk Hogan to postpone his NWA-TNA debut, "Q & A," *The Wrestler,* March 2004

"I was devastated. I couldn't believe what I was hearing."

—Christeena Lockwood, reacting to the death of her husband, Michael Lockwood (Crash Holly), the *Salisbury Post*

"Mike Lockwood achieved a dream that so many young athletes aspire to, but never quite realize. At 5'8" and all of 200 pounds, Mike achieved immeasurable success in a 'big man's world' against all odds. Mike made it to the big show … Mike paid his dues to the wrestling world and he left this world owing nobody. Mike gave his friendship unselfishly. Usually friendship is one thing and business is another, but not with Mike."

—Michael Modest, Donovan Morgan, and Frank Murdoch, paying tribute to their fellow trainer and long-time friend, in a written statement

"When Ric Flair was NWA champion, when Hulk Hogan was hot here, when 'Stone-Cold' was hot here, you didn't see a whole lot of laughing or giggling on the promos. It wasn't people getting laughs. It was a serious business. Now, I've done comedy stuff in the past, but that's not what I'm talking about. There was a serious vein, and the title was important, and it was the focus."

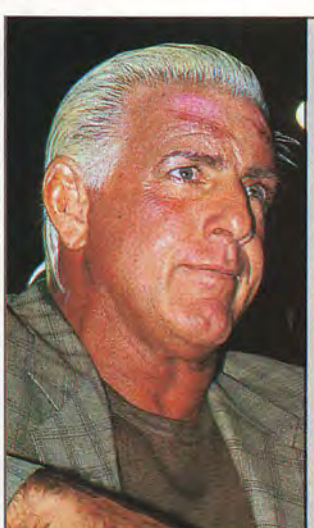
—Steve Austin, criticizing WWE Creative for doing too much comedy and too little wrestling, *No Holds Barred* radio show

"As far as TNA talent is concerned, we could not be more proud of our entire roster who give their heart and soul week after week to build this special group. We believe in being compassionate and giving guys a chance. From new, incredibly talented young men to veterans who may need lifting up when trying to change their lives."

—TNA President Dixie Carter, defending her company's decision to hire Lex Luger, in a written statement

"You've seen the reports. You know what he's been through."

—Scott Hudson, coming the closest to addressing the Luger-Elizabeth tragedy on the night of Lex Luger's debut with NWA-TNA, Total Nonstop Action



WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

John Cena: Been known to rock the microphone
Chilly Willy: Purple Heart for a patriot
A.J. Styles: Slayed a dragon
Ric Flair: Gave new meaning to R.F. Video
Shawn Michaels: A real survivor

LOSERS

Steve Austin: Forced to take a brief retirement
Bill Goldberg: Triple-H comes back no matter what
Shane McMahon: Traded a limo for an ambulance
Lee Marshall: Staggered by the IRS
Rocky Johnson: Mo' Mabel and no Rock

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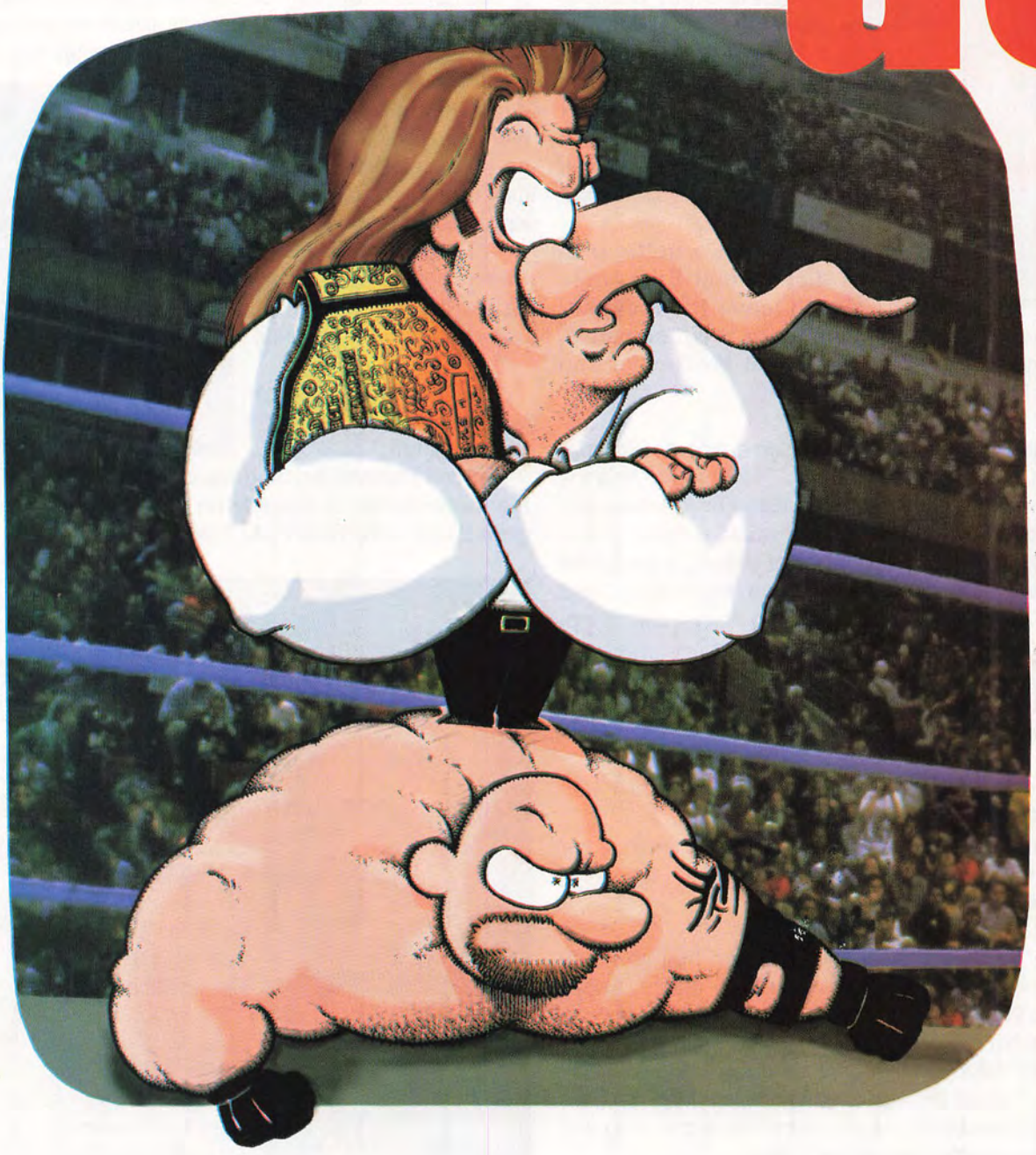


cember

THE EVOLUTION OF Evolution became complete at Armageddon, where Triple-H captured the WWE Raw title in a three-way match also involving Kane and defending champ Bill Goldberg, Randy Orton pinned Rob Van Dam for the Intercontinental belt, and Ric Flair and Batista beat the exhausted Dudley Boyz—who had just survived two previous bouts—in a gauntlet series for the Raw tag team straps. Yes, it did, indeed, feel like we were reliving The Four Horsemen's heyday in the NWA during the mid-1980s.

That was a downer for some fans, but Coalition forces serving in the Persian Gulf received a tremendous upper when the superstars of Smackdown—along with former Raw co-GM Steve Austin—made public appearances in the region. In addition, WWE surprised the wrestling and media worlds by holding a *Smackdown* taping in Baghdad. Just as WWE had hosted one of the first major public events following 9/11, Vince McMahon and company once again became national morale boosters.

Sadly, the industry lost former WCW star Jerry Tuite and indy veteran Mike Anthony as 2003 drew to a close. Much of December was spent preparing for the New Year, instead of dwelling on the past, however. Fans eagerly awaited The Rock's return to WWE, Hulk Hogan's debut in NWA-TNA, and Ring of Honor's new pure wrestling championship. Other than those anticipated happenings (and the Hogan debut wasn't quite a sure thing), no one knew what to expect from 2004.

SMACKDOWN INVADES IRAQ

In a logistical operation a bit reminiscent of President Bush's surprise Thanksgiving visit to Iraq, WWE held a *Smackdown* taping on Saturday, December 20, at "Camp Victory" in the nation's capital city of Baghdad. Although it was well-known that Smackdown superstars were visiting troops in Iraq and planned to tape some footage, the exact date, time, and site of the full-fledged TV taping, which aired in the U.S. on Christmas night, had been a closely guarded secret for security reasons.

Vince McMahon introduced Santa Claus to the enthusiastic crowd of Coalition troops. Santa threw gifts into the crowd, but McMahon complained because he didn't receive anything. Obviously, he hadn't realized this was a "Stone-Cold" Santa, who promptly gave the WWE chairman a low blow and a stunner. Also on the show, John Cena pinned U.S. champion The Big Show in a non-title match, Eddie Guerrero beat Chris Benoit, Rikishi defeated Rhyno, and The APA beat Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas. Torrie Wilson, Dawn Marie, and Sable delighted the males in the crowd by making appearances in revealing holiday outfits.

The previous day, Steve Austin, Torrie, Benoit, and Guerrero visited injured troops at the 28th U.S. Military Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad. Meanwhile, the United Service Organizations (USO) featured Kurt Angle, Robin Williams, and NASCAR driver Mike Wallace at Naval Support Activity Bahrain. Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, hosted the program.

"It's hard work coming out here for a few days and doing USO shows," Angle told the crowd. "But it's nothing compared to the hard work you do out here every day."

Angle and former model and TV personality Leeann Tweeden in Baghdad

U.S. Air Force Photo By Tech. S

Third time was the charm for "The Game"

TRIPLE-H REGAINS WWE RAW TITLE AT ARMAGEDDON

Bill Goldberg wasn't able to rid himself of Triple-H, not even after he beat "The Game" for the second consecutive time at Survivor Series. At Armageddon, Goldberg had to defend the WWE Raw championship against Triple-H and Kane in a three-way match. Would Triple-H and Kane forge an evil alliance? Or would Kane remember Katie Vick?

Triple-H and Kane double-teamed Goldberg at first, but the Raw champion fought back, taking Kane over with a powerslam at only the three-minute mark and clotheslining Helmsley over the top rope. Kane finally stopped a charging Goldberg with a big boot. He and Triple-H got smart again and attacked Goldberg as if it were a handicap match. They took over Goldberg with a double-suplex. Kane then executed a powerslam on Goldberg, yet Triple-H tried to make the cover. "The Big Red Machine" yanked Triple-H off by the hair, and accidentally clotheslined him. Goldberg proceeded to hit Kane with a big boot, but Kane recovered quickly and awkwardly dropped him over the top rope, prompting Jim Ross to quip, "This is a bowling shoe-ugly match."

From there, Goldberg, Helmsley, and Kane brawled down the aisle. After the three men survived spears, pedigrees, DDTs, and collapsing announce tables, "The Game" momentarily gained the advantage inside the ring with an eyepoke to Goldberg. The blinded champion rebounded with spears to both Kane and Helmsley, and fought off Evolution members Ric Flair and Randy Orton. As Goldberg and Kane clasped each other's throats, Triple-H gave Goldberg a low blow, enabling Kane to choke-slam him. At the 19-minute mark, Batista pulled Kane out of the ring as Triple-H pinned "Da Man" to win his third Raw title.

THE ROCK CONFIRMS WWE RETURN

When The Rock made a surprise appearance on *Raw* in December, coming to the aid of co-General Manager Mick Foley during a confrontation with La Resistance, fans assumed it might be another one-shot deal. As it turned out, The Rock had already committed to a short-term return to *Raw* and to compete at WrestleMania XX.

The Rock was scheduled to appear on at least two *Raw* broadcasts in January 2004, and return in March for the weeks leading to WrestleMania. During part of January and most of February, "The Great One" would be busy filming a movie titled *Be Cool.*

"[The producers of *Be Cool*] restructured the shooting schedule for me so I can shoot everything I need to shoot all the way through February, then come back again and build up for WrestleMania," The Rock said in an interview with wwe.com. "After WrestleMania, I go into full-fledged press for *Walking Tall.* After *Walking Tall,* I'll go into full-fledged preproduction for *Spy Hunter."*

The Rock certainly hoped a temporary return to WWE would boost ticket sales for *Walking Tall,* a remake of a movie loosely based on the real life of former Tennessee sheriff Buford Pusser, which was scheduled for release in April. His previous release, *The Rundown,* garnered rave reviews, but despite one weekend in the number-one spot, was considered a bit of a financial disappointment.

The *Washington Post* reported that

"'[The producers of *Be Cool*] restructured the shooting schedule for me so I can shoot everything I need to shoot all the way through February, then come back again and build up for WrestleMania.'"

Kane stares down Triple-H
Armageddon, December 14, 2003
Photo by Duane Long

Rock 'n' Sock reunion!

Rock would co-star with John Travolta and Danny DeVito in *Be Cool,* a sequel to *Get Shorty,* playing a bodyguard who happens to be an aspiring actor.

JERRY TUITE DIES IN JAPAN

Better known as Malice in NWA-TNA and The Wall in WCW, Jerry Tuite was one of the most talented big men to emerge in North America during the past few years. He flirted with main event status several times, and even attracted the attention of some WWE executives when WWE bought WCW in 2001, but never had a true breakthrough moment. As of December 6, it became a tragic certainty that Tuite would never realize his true potential. That was the day he was found dead in his hotel room. According to a preliminary investigation, the cause of death was listed as acute cardiac arrest. Since no foul play was suspected, officials allowed his body to be cremated.

"As of December 6, it became a tragic certainty that Tuite would never realize his true potential."

Tuite had wrestled as Gigantes during a tour with All-Japan. In his final match, he teamed with Bull Buchanan and Justin Credible against Nobutaka Araya, Tomoaki Honma, and Kazushi Miyamoto. Tuite's body was discovered just hours before he was to catch a flight and return home to the United States. He was only 36 years old.

The New Jersey native had attended "Iron" Mike Sharpe's training school before meeting Bam Bam Bigelow, who referred him to WCW's Power Plant. There, Kevin Nash became his mentor, and Tuite soon debuted on WCW television as The Wall, the stoic bodyguard for Berlyn (Alex Wright). He also wrestled as Sgt. A-Wall in the Misfits In Action group.

Tuite drastically streamlined his physique before appearing on NWA-TNA's pay-per-view debut in June 2002. Competing as Malice, he made it to the "Gauntlet For The Gold" final, narrowly losing to Ken Shamrock in a bout for the vacant NWA heavyweight title.

The Wall vs. Scott Steiner (2000)

Mark Jindrak contorts Lance Storm
Armageddon, December 14, 2003
Photo by Duane Long

Orton's first taste of WWE gold

RANDY ORTON BEATS ROB VAN DAM FOR INTERCONTINENTAL BELT

Would Randy Orton follow in the footsteps of The Rock? Like "The Great One," Orton was hailed as a third-generation blue-chipper and, as Rock did in The Nation, Orton became the hot prospect in Evolution. And, like Rock, he didn't waste much time in winning the Intercontinental title. Orton accomplished that task by defeating Rob Van Dam at Armageddon. To make matters more interesting, his new rival, Raw co-General Manager Mick Foley, served as special referee.

Van Dam toyed with Orton at first, and "The Legend Killer" didn't execute an impressive move until he downed RVD with a cross-bodyblock off the top rope. Van Dam responded with a cannonball dive from inside the ring onto Orton on the arena floor.

When Orton, for the second time, was slow to break a chokehold along the ropes, referee Foley scolded him, prompting Ric Flair to go crazy at ringside. Moments later, Van Dam unleashed rolling thunder and was about to cover Orton when Flair jumped into the ring and distracted him. Orton surprised the champion with a near-fall.

Van Dam fought back, though, and climbed to the top turnbuckle, perhaps to finish off Orton with the five-star frog splash, but Flair—brandishing a foreign object—distracted him again. Orton knocked Van Dam off the top turnbuckle and stunned RVD with the RKO. Foley, figuring Orton had used foul means, but not having the grounds to outright disqualify him, reluctantly made the three-count.

Randy Orton, the son of "Cowboy" Bob Orton Jr. and the grandson of "Big O" Bob Orton Sr., became the first wrestler in his family to capture a championship in WWE.

"Jeff Jarrett made the big mistake of bragging about his intention of doing nothing but 'sitting back, relaxing, and watching the show.'"

STING PINS NWA CHAMPION JEFF JARRETT IN NON-TITLE BOUT

At the beginning of the December 17 TNA pay-per-view, NWA champion Jeff Jarrett made the big mistake of bragging about his intention of doing nothing but "sitting back, relaxing, and watching the show." NWA official Erik Watts heard Jarrett's comments and booked Jarrett in the opening match ... against the man called Sting.

While Watts didn't have the power to make it a title bout, Sting was excited about the match nonetheless. Jarrett, accompanied at ringside by Don Callis, played a cat-and-mouse game of luring Sting to the arena floor, trying to turn the match into a chaotic brawl. But Sting was ready for that kind of fight, and smashed a trash can over his head. Moments later, he reversed a vertical suplex, sending Jarrett crashing onto the stage.

Sting maintained the advantage until he mistimed a leapfrog, causing Jarrett's head to hit him below the belt. Jarrett tried to capitalize, but Sting evened the score by giving Jarrett a headfirst low blow on the mat. After Sting recovered, he whipped Jarrett into the turnbuckles and swatted him with a Stinger splash, then snared him in a scorpion deathlock.

That's when the outside interference,

Too bad it was non-title, *eh*, Sting?

which TNA fans, unfortunately, have come to expect, took place. Red Shirt Security, Kevin Northcutt and Legend, saved Jarrett from a sure tapout. But America's Most Wanted chased off the Red Shirts. Kid Kash seized the opportunity to hand Jarrett a guitar. In the meantime, A.J. Styles had bounded to the ring. He smacked Kash and took the guitar from Jarrett. Sting surprised Jarrett with a scorpion deathdrop and earned a non-title pinfall victory over the NWA champ.

NATHAN JONES QUITS WWE

Criticized for his clumsiness in the ring and often avoided because of his creepy demeanor, Nathan Jones decided that life as a WWE superstar wasn't for him … and quit on December 6, during the "Passport To Smackdown" tour of Australia. Interestingly, he quit his job just before one of the most important matches of his career, headlining as a fan favorite against Chuck Palumbo in front of his countrymen in Perth.

Jones had been promoted heavily prior to the tour, with Vince McMahon discussing the 6'10", 330-pound star on the Australian equivalent of *60 Minutes.* McMahon believed that Jones' background as a prison inmate, along with his incredible ring presence, would eventually make him a main-eventer.

The former World Wrestling All-Stars champion had a rocky tenure in WWE. Jones had been slated to team with The Undertaker at WrestleMania XIX, but due to his questionable ring skills, he only did a run-in at the end of the match. Shortly thereafter, he was sent to Ohio Valley for more training. In his last high-profile WWE appearance, Jones teamed with Smackdown champion Brock Lesnar, U.S. champ The Big Show, A-Train, and Matt Morgan against Team Angle at Survivor Series.

Jones' closest friends outside the ring, including John Cena and Scotty Too Hotty, insisted that WWE's rigorous travel schedule was the major factor in his decision.

"It was killing him," Rick Bassman, Jones' trainer at UPW's Ultimate University, told wwe.com. "He was a big guy, and he was traveling in cramped conditions. I've been on tour buses with him in Japan where we see him start to get that look where it's like, he's just about had enough. It doesn't make him a bad person. It just doesn't work for him."

LONG-TIME INDY STAR MIKE LOZANSKY DIES AT 35

Mike Lozansky, a 12-year wrestling veteran, died suddenly on December 18. According to family members, he most likely died of a heart condition or fluid in the lungs. Autopsy results weren't available as of press time.

Billed as a native of Calgary, Alberta, Lozansky was the classic journeyman wrestler, first gaining fame in Mexico as the masked Tigre Canadiense. He regularly competed in EMLL and was instrumental in Chris Jericho getting a start in Mexico in the early-1990s. Although Lozansky lost his mask to Villano IV in 1991, he rebounded to win the WING junior heavyweight title and appeared in Mexico on occasion for another decade.

He also traveled to the USWA, where he won the tag team title twice in 1993 as Mike Anthony, once with Jeff Gaylord and a second time with Moondog Spike. Lozansky reigned as IWA Puerto Rico junior heavyweight champion the following year. During this same period, Loz-

Jones tapped out

Mike Lozansky dropkicks Mikey Whipwreck (1998)

"'Once a land of pure workrate with no frills, ROH has seen riots, raves, and alcoholic fathers come into play ... In an effort to stay true to its roots, ROH has decided to crown a Pure wrestling champion.'"

ansky defeated Jim Backlund in Florida for the WING International New Generation junior heavyweight belt, which he held until the promotion shut down in 1994. He also competed in Europe's Catch Wrestling Association and All-Japan Pro Wrestling.

Lozansky's highest-profile run occurred in ECW. Although firmly established in the lower tier, he had impressive matches against Mikey Whipwreck and then-TV champion Rob Van Dam.

By the end of his career, Lozansky had become a mainstay in Illinois and Michigan, primarily with Windy City Wrestling. He battled several former WWF stars on the Midwest indy circuit, including Bob Backlund, Tatanka, and Brutus Beefcake.

RING OF HONOR INTRODUCES PURE WRESTLING TITLE

Perhaps attempting to steal attention from NWA-TNA's high-flying X division, Ring of Honor officials decided near the end of the year to establish a championship to promote straightforward, mat-based wrestling. While the ROH singles title would continue to be defended under conventional rules, the new Ring of Honor pure wrestling championship would mark a return to the days of Thesz, Lewis, and Tragos.

Williams: purest of pure in ROH?

Three specific rules will make pure wrestling title defenses unique. First, a wrestler is allowed only three rope breaks during the course of a match. Once a wrestler has reached that limit, his opponent is not required to break the hold. Second, a 20-count rule will be strictly enforced to limit brawls on the arena floor. Third, closed fists are forbidden. Every use of a closed fist will count as a rope break. If a wrestler has none of his three allotted rope-breaks left, he will be disqualified. A title cannot change hands as the result of a DQ.

Ring of Honor planned to hold an eight-man tournament in early-2004. U.K. star Doug Williams, who had been frustrated in his attempts to capture the ROH singles belt, intended a U.S. return to compete specifically for the pure wrestling title. Considering that some of the rule changes were consistent with traditional British matches, Williams was considered a favorite to win the championship at some point.

"Once a land of pure workrate with no frills, ROH has seen riots, raves, and alcoholic fathers come into play," officials noted on the promotion's Web site. "In an effort to stay true to its roots, ROH has decided to crown a Pure wrestling champion."

LIONEL TATE TO RECEIVE NEW TRIAL

On December 10, appellate judges ordered a new trial for Lionel Tate, a 16-year-old boy serving a life sentence for killing Tiffany Eunick, a six-year-old playmate. During the 1999 trial, Tate's attorney, Jim Lewis, had blamed pro wrestling for Tate's actions, stating that the youngster—who was 12 at the time—was simply mimicking the superstars he watched on television. Lewis had tried to subpoena stars such as The Rock and Sting to appear at the trial, but the judge overruled those attempts.

The 4th District Court of Appeal reasoned that Tate's first-degree murder conviction should be reversed because the boy's competency should have been evaluated before the trial. In 1999, Tate's family had turned down a plea bargain that would have given him only a three-year sentence.

"A competency hearing should have been held, particularly given the complexity of the legal proceedings," the judges wrote in a nine-page ruling. They also cited Tate's young age and developmental immaturity. The judges' decision was the latest development in an ongoing debate in Florida regarding

child murderers who are sentenced to life terms with no chance of parole.

While Tate's attorney had argued that the killing of Eunick was completely accidental, prosecutors maintained that Tate's relentless attack of the girl went beyond re-enacting wrestling matches he had seen on television. WWE attorneys were very critical of what they considered grandstanding tactics on Jim Lewis' behalf.

IN OTHER NEWS

Demond Thompson (Lamont), Mark Magnus, Chris Cage, Tank Toland, Brent Albright, and Bobby Lashley signed WWE developmental contracts ... WWE launched a $2-million advertising campaign to promote *Smackdown,* and planned to do the same for *Raw* in the near future ... Shawn Michaels, citing the increased mobility of his back, committed to a full-time schedule ... *WWE Originals,* a CD featuring wrestlers actually singing their own songs, was scheduled for release in January ... Women's champion Molly Holly pinned Ivory at Armageddon ... Also at the pay-per-view, Ric Flair and Batista won a gauntlet series for the Raw tag team title, and Chris Jericho and Christian defeated Trish Stratus and Lita ... Spike Dudley revealed that he had temporarily lost feeling in his left arm due to a neck injury ... Stacy Keibler turned down an offer to pose nude for and grace the cover of the March 2004 issue of *Playboy* ... WWE released Goldust ... Bill Goldberg planned to shoot scenes for an independent film, *Santa's Slay,* in February ... Major League Wrestling scheduled a return to The Sunshine Network, abandoned plans for expansion to the Northeast, and refocused on its house show business in Florida ... Shinsuke Nakamura defeated Hiroyoshi Tenzan for the IWGP title in Osaka, Japan ... Dusty Rhodes pinned Jerry Lawler at an International Wrestling Cartel show in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, with Mick Foley as the special referee ... Jasmin St. Claire Inc. announced plans to become a public company listed on Nasdaq in the near future.

BUSINESS STORY OF THE MONTH
NWA-TNA NEGOTIATES WITH WGN

Would Chicago's WGN follow the lead of Atlanta's WTBS and use pro wrestling to catapult itself to true "superstation" status? That was still an unanswered question as of December, but, according to reports, NWA-TNA was busy trying to convince WGN—available in 60 million homes nationwide—that wrestling was the missing element in its schedule.

Since TNA's inception, the Jarretts have sought a media outlet that would allow greater exposure without compromising their business model. In other words, they want the TV time, but they would rather not pay much for it. Dating back to the territorial days, including Jerry Jarrett's 30 years as a promoter in Memphis, promotions have traditionally not paid for air time. The reasoning is that pro wrestling usually garners high enough ratings that local stations can easily sell commercial time to other sponsors at reasonable rates.

That was the roadblock in negotiations between WGN and TNA. Reportedly, WGN typically charges from $25,000 to $75,000 per hour. So what could overcome that hurdle? WGN could lower those charges if TNA bought commercial time during other programs. Or Panda Energy and the Jarretts could offer WGN, owned by media giant Tribune, a stake in the company.

By the end of December, many insiders were expecting TNA to cave in and agree to pay for the exposure starting early in 2004. If TNA's buy rates improved dramatically, due to the arrival of Hulk Hogan or a renewed interest in wrestling overall, WGN would probably reconsider the terms of the deal, assuming one is, indeed, worked out in the first place.

WRESTLER OF THE MONTH: STING

For Sting, wrestling had become fun again. True, he didn't have to rely on pure thirst and desire to sustain himself on the indy circuit before hitting the big time. Sting, along with The Ultimate Warrior, was a bodybuilder who was carefully groomed for pro wrestling by California-based trainer Rick Bassman. Once Sting began enjoying success in pro wrestling, however, his buoyant enthusiasm appealed to an entire generation of WCW fans. Often wearing a marching jacket and even carrying a baton on occasion, Sting was pro wrestling's unofficial cheerleader.

In later years, he got bogged down in WCW. He was exiled to the rafters for 15 months. His long-awaited match against then-WCW champ Hulk Hogan was a disappointment. He went from the black-and-white crow character to a pumpkin-faced member of NWO Wolfpac. He had a forgettable heel turn toward the end. He was unimpressive in WCW's final match ever, his brief *Nitro* encounter with Ric Flair.

Since resisting overtures from WWE and becoming a part-time member of the NWA-TNA roster, Sting has been re-invigorated. The definition has returned to his physique. The enthusiasm has returned to his game. The champion has returned to the wrestler.

Sting proved that by beating NWA champion Jeff Jarrett in a non-title match on December 17. Yes, Sting caused controversy when he persuaded management to give his old friend Lex Luger a shot with TNA in November. But that relates to Sting's most superb quality: loyalty. He was loyal to WCW, and now he is loyal to his friend and TNA.

Sterling James Keenan twists C.M. Punk
International Wrestling Cartel, December 12, 2003
Photo by Timothy A. Walker

MATCH OF THE MONTH: SHAWN MICHAELS vs. BATISTA

Batista tortures HBK

"The Heartbreak Kid," who turned in a tremendous performance at Survivor Series, faced the intimidating Batista at Armageddon. Evolution was trying to use Shawn Michaels as a steppingstone for Batista, just as they had attempted with Randy Orton.

Michaels employed an unusual strategy at the start, going against the conventional wisdom that would suggest he avoid brawling with a chiseled monster like Batista. But Michaels surprised Batista by outslugging him, allowing HBK to easily fluster the big man with his usual high-flying offense. Ric Flair finally helped Batista regroup on the arena floor.

A calmer Batista wore down Michaels with knees to the midsection, clotheslines, and elbows to the head—tactics pulled directly from Kevin Nash's playbook. Batista kneed Michaels in his vulnerable back, and then stretched HBK's back over his knee.

Michaels fought back, first with punches, and then chops, a flying forearm, an inverted atomic drop, and a DDT from mid-air. The former WWE World champion came off with a flying elbowsmash from the top rope and then attempted a superkick, but Batista caught his foot … and gave him two thunderous power bombs. Batista tried to follow those with a tiger bomb, but Michaels, being more familiar with Japanese maneuvers, escaped and hit the Evolution member with a superkick and scored the pinfall at the 12-minute mark.

Batista, of course, vented his fury later that night, when he and Flair defeated The Dudley Boyz in a gauntlet series final for the WWE Raw tag team title.

ODDBALL STORY OF THE MONTH: JIM DUGGAN CLEANS OUT HIS ATTIC

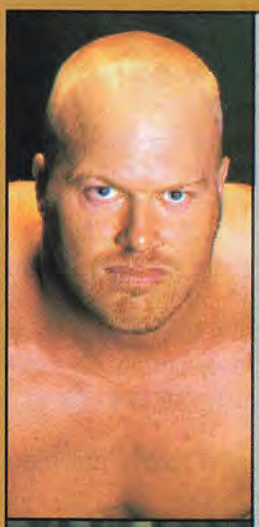
A few years ago, in the "Oddball" spotlight, WRESTLING ANNUAL documented Jim Duggan's discovery of the old WCW TV belt in a trash can, which Scott Hall had callously disregarded a few months earlier. WCW allowed Hacksaw to keep the title and declared him the new champion. As we noted at the time, "Duggan proved that one man's trash is another man's treasure."

We didn't know the half of it. Duggan continued to get mileage out of the TV championship in 2003 when he placed the title belt on eBay. The online auction began at $1,000 on December 5, and legitimate bidders—at least ones who received high marks from eBay—raised the amount to $6,980 on December 12, the final day. Unfortunately, an unethical bidder put in a bogus bid of $7,080 to "win" the item.

At the same time, Duggan was also auctioning off the official King of the Ring crown and cape he had won 15 years earlier. The same tricky bidder overcame a seemingly legitimate bid of $1,200, raising the total to a bogus $1,225. Someone, possibly Duggan or a relative, posted negative feedback regarding the bidder, claiming, "He or she made bids knowing that they NEVER intended to purchase the items."

Housecleaning for ol' Hacksaw

Maybe Duggan should have held out for more money, anyway. After all, Killer Brooks sold the National belt to Larry Zbyszko for $25,000, and that was 20 years earlier. But wait a minute. Who said Duggan has the right to sell the belt or the crown? Doesn't Vince McMahon own that stuff?



WINNERS & LOSERS

WINNERS

Evolution: The best since Ric, Arn, Tully, and Barry
Sting: Avenged his WWA title loss
Nathan Jones: Didn't need a round-trip ticket
Shawn Michaels: His back is back
Lionel Tate: Getting another chance

LOSERS

Saddam Hussein: Left rat hole before *Smackdown* came to town
Bill Goldberg: It was like he was hit with a taser
Rob Van Dam: The RKO beat RVD
Goldust: *F-F-F @#$% Fired!*
Jim Duggan: What happened to that Mid-South TV medal?

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"Vince would have gone a lot further with the company, and things would be a lot better for the business if he'd been nicer and a little more considerate of his wrestlers over all these years ... The company would look a lot better and would stand a lot higher today if he treated his Bruno Sammartinos and his Hulk Hogans and his Bret Harts with just a little more appreciation for what we brought to the company."

—Bret Hart, criticizing Vince McMahon's treatment of his former superstars, "Q & A," *The Wrestler,* May 2004

"I'd certainly like to get in the ring someday if the opportunity presents itself. I really enjoy what I'm doing right now, and I'm just concentrating on being in The Cat's corner right now. If I don't get a chance to wrestle, I'm fine with that. I'm having fun and living a dream. You can't argue with that."

—Lamont, commenting on his callup from Ohio Valley to WWE, "Introducing," *The Wrestler,* May 2004

"I knew Spike Dudley way back when. I knew him before the crowd-surfing, bodyslamming, and chair-throwing that make him one of the most entertaining wrestlers to watch nowadays. I knew him back when he was just plain old Mr. Hyson, the poetry-loving, math-tutoring, whistling yard duty that seemed forever available to give out hugs and shoot hoops."

—Jess, a former student of ex-teacher's aide Spike Dudley, wwe.com

"I turned it down because that's not the way I want my career to go. It's just not something I want to do at this time in my life. Nothing against the girls who have done it, because I think they look beautiful, and I think it's an incredibly sexy thing. It's just not something I want to do right now."

—Stacy Keibler, explaining why she turned down an offer to pose for *Playboy,* the *Miami Herald*

"We started in San Jose at our TV taping of *Smackdown,* we flew out that night to Seoul, Korea. We tried to crash in Russia at a fuel stop, missing the runway twice in a blizzard, only to get into Seoul in time to do an appearance at the Army base and head to the arena ... Anyway, long story short, we traveled a bunch, and drank a lot of beer. Overall, a good time."

—Bradshaw, offering a typical wrestler's perspective on Smackdown's tour of Asia and Australia, wwe.com

"These are authentic, no-b.s. performances by everybody's favorite WWE superstars. Fans are going to be amazed by the talent level and the musical sensitivity from people that do something so ostensibly rough and tough. The goal of this is to not be a gimmick record ... *WWE Originals* lets fans peek behind the curtain a bit."

—Long-time WWE musical director Jim Johnston, hailing the most original WWE release since *The Wrestling Album,* in a press release

"It was a horrible day, just raining cold rain all day long. Larry [Booker] had a big family—a lot of brothers and sisters. He had been married six times and had seven children. They were all there. His mother was there ... You could see Larry in the open casket lying there. It just seemed so surreal to know that just two days before that, he was alive, vibrant, wrestling, doing what he loved best."

—Jerry Lawler, describing the funeral of Moondog Spot, wwe.com

"It was really tough for me to look across that Thanksgiving table and see all of those empty chairs, and my little kids where my brothers used to be ... Grief doesn't get better. When you lose someone, all of your friends bring food over the first couple of weeks, the reality of the loss hasn't set in yet. The reality, it really hits you in the face, one, two months later. That's when the food is not there, that's when the house is empty, and that's when the people are suffering."

—Kevin Von Erich, reflecting upon the loss of all his brothers as the calendar again approached Christmas, *Pro Wrestling Radio*

"I feel as good now as I've ever felt. That's why I know I'm right where I'm supposed to be. Physically, I feel unbelievable. I've experienced healing that only comes from miracles. I know, for some folks, that's a stretch. I was told I'd never wrestle again. Not with that type of back injury. And I am."

—Shawn Michaels, proving why he's the most resilient superstar in the history of WWE, the *Fresno Bee*

"Somehow, some way, Shawn Michaels has pulled this one out in the bottom of the ninth, the fourth quarter, overtime, with sweet chin music, almost taking the head off Batista!"

—Jim Ross, showing why he might be wrestling's best announcer of all-time, Armageddon

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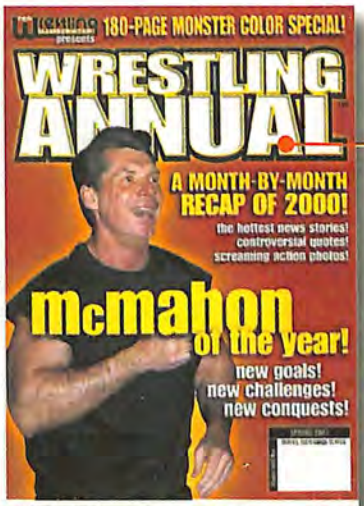

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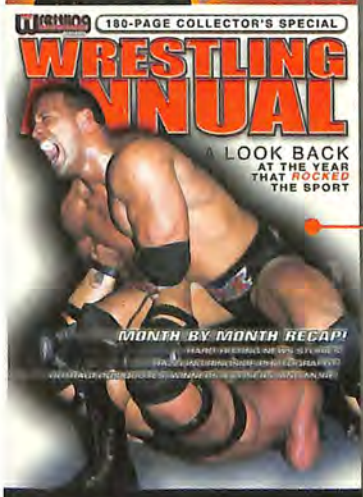

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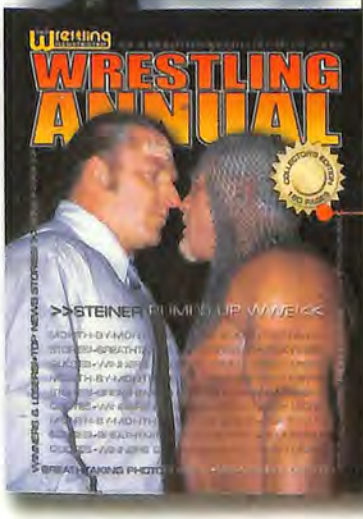

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